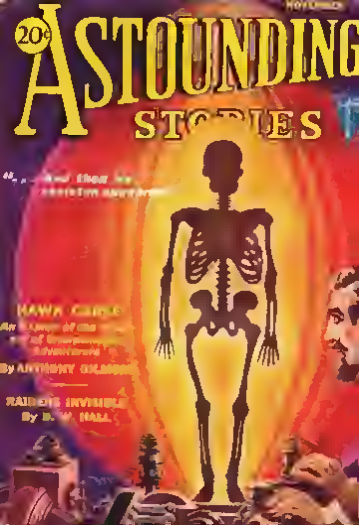

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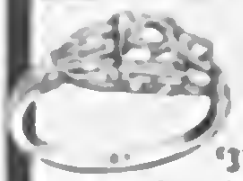
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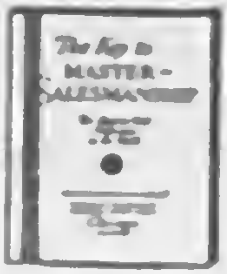
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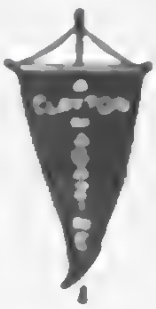
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On Sale the First Thursday of Each Month

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That such periodicals and agree to maintain a high grade.
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VOL. VIII, No. 2 — NOVEMBER, 1931

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Confronted by Crazy Tales of an Indestructible Presence on Asteroid Z-40, Harley 2014N20 Sets Out Alone to Face and Master It.

HAWK CARSE — ANTHONY GILMORE — 166
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At Last the Three Earthlings Must Face to Face the Unbelieved Something of the Uncanny Powers. Conclusion.

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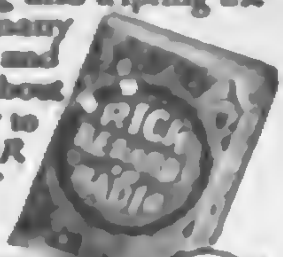
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FILL OUT AND MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY

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Dear Mr. Smith: Send me your free book. I understand this request does not obligate me and that no salesman will call.

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$200 a week

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$300 extra in 6 months

When I took your course I was employed by one of the large stores. My boss would not give me a raise, although I had been with him a long time. I obtained a position with a Radio jobber and made $300 extra in six months. BUTT MOORE, R. R. 8, Box 64, Indianapolis, Ind.

If you are earning a penny less than $50 a week, send for my book of information on the opportunities in Radio. It is free. Clip the coupon NOW. Why be satisfied with $25, $30 or $40 a week for longer than the short time it takes to get ready for Radio?

Radio's growth opening hundreds of $60, $75, $100 a week jobs every year

In about ten years Radio has grown from a $2,000,000 to a $1,000,000,000 industry. Over 300,000 jobs have been created. Hundreds more are being opened every year by the continued growth. Many men and young men with the right training—the kind of training I give you—are stepping into Radio at two and three times their former salaries.

You have many jobs to choose from

Broadcasting stations use engineers, operators, station managers and pay $1,200 to $5,000 a year. Manufacturers continually need testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, service men, buyers, for jobs paying up to $7,500 a year. Shipping companies use hundreds of Radio operators, give them world-wide travel with board and lodging free and a salary of $80 to $100 a month. Dealers and jobbers employ service men, salesmen, buyers, managers, and pay $50 to $100 a week. There are many other opportunities too.

So many opportunities many N. R. I. men make $200 to $1,000 while learning

The day you enroll with me I'll show you how to do 28 jobs, common in most every neighborhood, for spare time money. Throughout your course I send you information on servicing popular makes of sets. I give you the plans and ideas that are making $200 to $1,000 for hundreds of N. R. I. students in their spare time while studying. My course is famous as the course that pays for itself.

Talking Movies, Television, Aircraft Radio are also included

Special training in Talking Movies, Television and home Television experiments. Radio's use in Aviation. Servicing and Merchandising Sets. Broadcasting. Commercial and Ship Stations are included. I am so sure that I can train you satisfactorily that I will agree in writing to refund every penny of your tuition if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service upon completing.

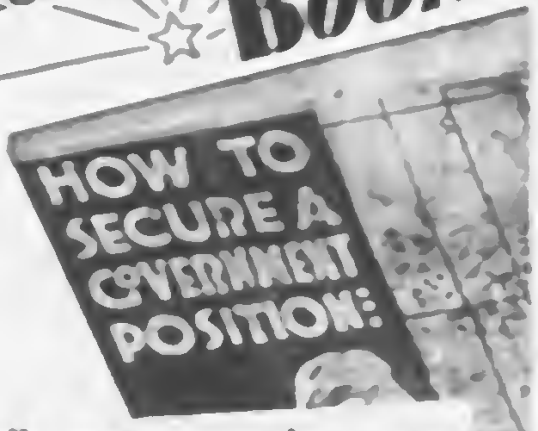
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Send now for my Free Book!



It tells you, page by page, how to get a steady

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I HAVE shown thousands of fellows like you the way to secure the well paid employment Civil Service jobs they are in. And the very FIRST step they took was to send for my FREE BOOK. Like a good fellow you mainly what I want. I am going to send you my FREE BOOK. Then by page this book tells you EVERYTHING you want to know about getting a Government Position. Make me a true friend—

PAGE 4 tells What Uncle Sam Pays

With the Book explained here in the world. You don't have to worry all the time about health and living. Civil SERVICE FIXES AND UNIT AFFECT THE GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE. Civil to give an increase of $100 a year more than other workers. Both long Periods (three years to 30 days) a year, and every to the highest paid jobs. My book gives examples of every branch.

PAGE 8 tells How You Pick Your Job

Then the job you want is long overdue. I am not sure to your Select Local Offices, or work in a Government. In [illegible] I have been the most opportunity.

PAGE 12 tells How I Prepare You Quickly

I am right proud I was Official Examiner of the Civil Service Commission [illegible] and what kind of questions are asked. You are [illegible] to have you to pass it [illegible] and to interest one of the FIRST appointments.

PAGE 16 tells About Raises Every Year

I am sure I have to tell the Book's many promises of a raise and [illegible] get it. [illegible] suggested to your particular [illegible] Book all about the Big ADVANTAGES of my FREE BOOK.

PAGE 18 tells About Vacations with Pay

In most branches you get up to 30 days with pay every year and up to 30 days sick leave. But no book for full information on this [illegible] point.

PAGE 20 tells About Civil Service Pensions

Every Year Government [illegible] with what you've been paid. The re- [illegible] has a definite pension. Let me know and read all about this

MAIL COUPON TODAY!

If you're an ambitious citizen, I'm for you. Just send [illegible] FREE BOOK. Learn today how you can [illegible] a [illegible] a wonderful PERMANENT position. Write for [illegible] Book. It will be a Lifelong Friend. Mail Coupon [illegible] Address Book Dept. 1288, Washington, D. C.

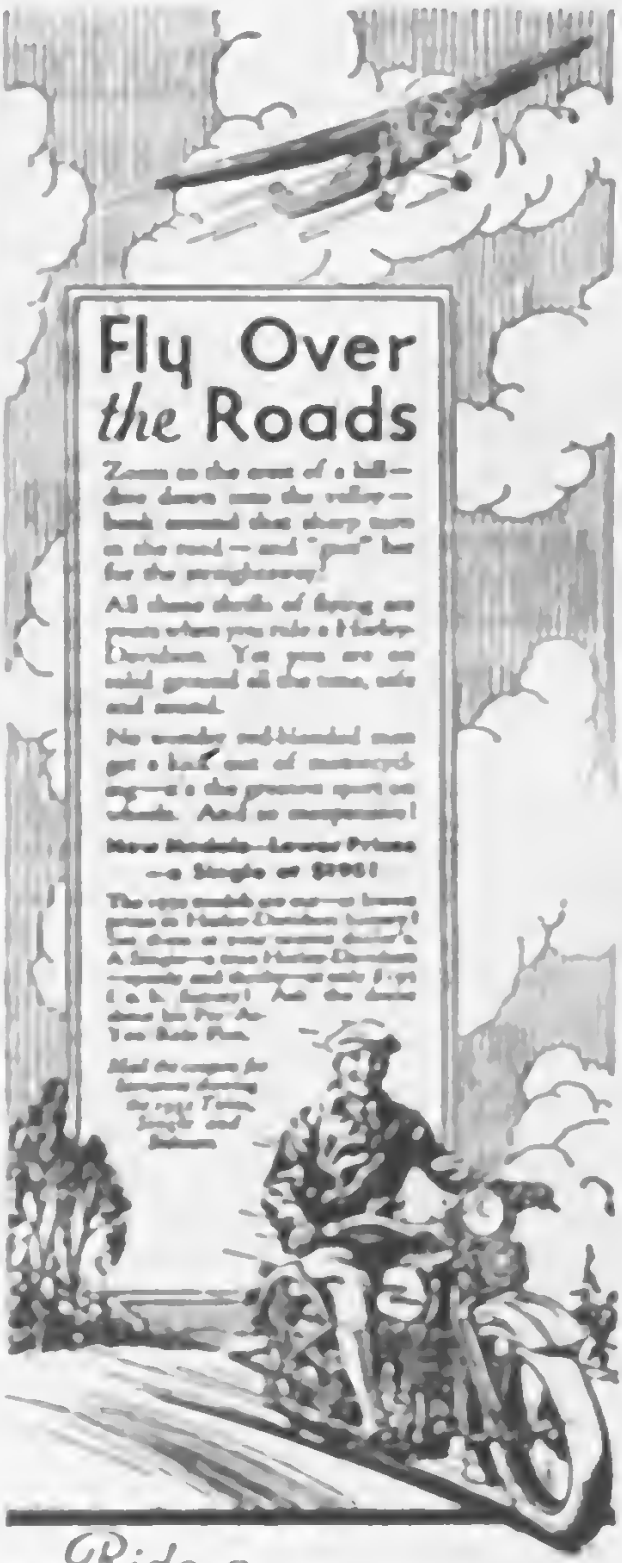
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PATTERSON SCHOOL, 1408 Victor Building, Washington, D. C.

Please send me your FREE BOOK, telling how I can secure a Government Position.

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Fly Over the Roads

Zoom on the crest of a hill—dive down into the valley—look around the sharp turn in the road—and "gun" her for the straightaway!

All these thrills of flying are yours when you ride a Harley-Davidson. You pass on solid ground all the time, safe and sound.

No wonder 100,000 men get a kick out of motorcycling—and the greatest sport on wheels. And so inexpensive!

New Models—Lower Prices
—a Single as $285!

The new models are now on [illegible] Harley-Davidson [illegible] the dates of your nearest dealer's. A Single is now Harley-Davidson [illegible] and developed with [illegible] (A.V. Engine). Ask the dealer about his Pay As You Ride Plan.

Mail the coupon for literature describing the new Twins, Single and Sidecars.

Ride a HARLEY-DAVIDSON

MAIL THE COUPON

Harley-Davidson Co., Dept. 812, Milwaukee, Wis.
Send me your literature and dealer's name.

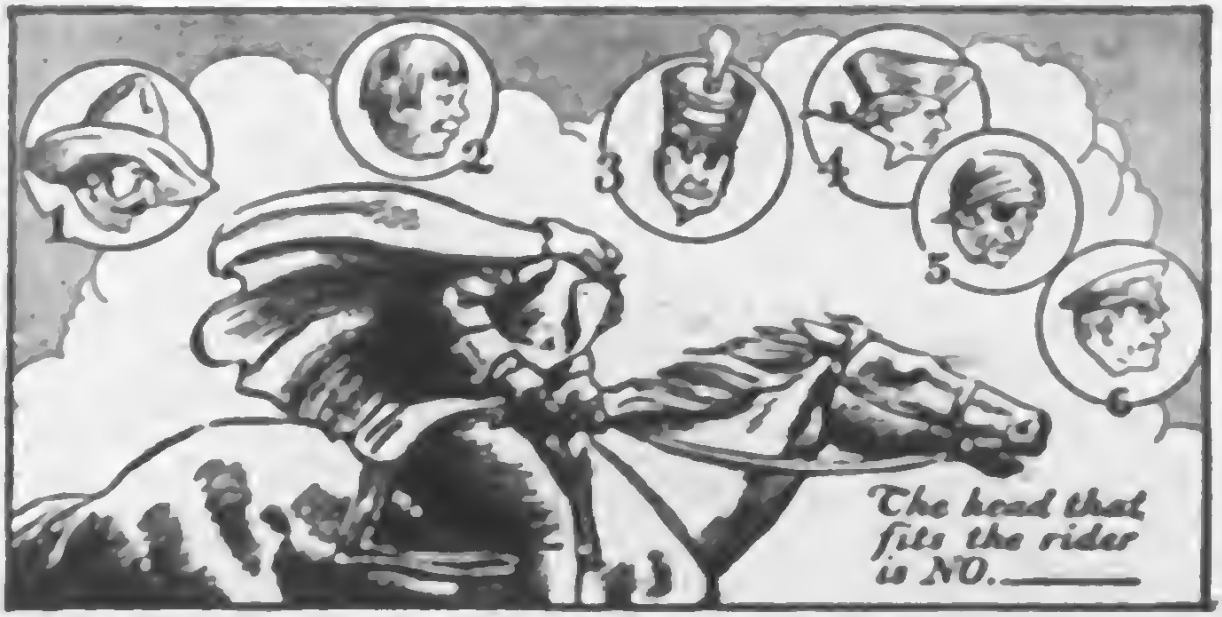
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Win $3,700.00

OR BUICK 8 SEDAN AND $2,500 IN CASH



Solve this Old Mystery

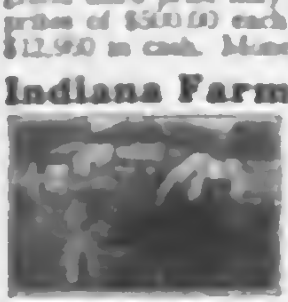
Find the Head of the Mysterious Headless Horseman. Six heads are shown. Only one of them belongs to the Mysterious Headless Horseman who for years struck terror to the heart of a peaceful village. No one ever saw his head. Can you now solve this age-old mystery? Here is your chance to qualify to win $3,700.00 cash or Buick 8 Cylinder Sedan and $2,500 cash besides. You must look carefully. See that the head you pick fits the rider of the mysterious night rider. Rush your answer at once to qualify in this gigantic distribution of $12,960 or 4 Buick Sedans and $8,160.00 in Cash Prizes.

This sensational, easy money making opportunity is just our way of advertising. Someone who solves our puzzle is going to win $3,700.00. Many other big cash prizes. Anyone may win—why not you? This big fortune in cash and automobiles must be given away. Find the Headless Horseman's Head. Get your share of this easy money.

Easy to Win $12,960.00 in 103 Cash Prizes

We will give away $12,960 in cash. You are sure to profit if you take an active part. In case of ties duplicate prizes will be given. You get $3,700 if you win grand first prize. In addition there are 102 other wonderful cash prizes. The winner of the grand second prize may win $2,200, and winner of the grand third prize may win $1,700. Also four other prizes of $500.00 each and many others. All told $12,960 in cash. Money to pay you is already on deposit in the Mercantile Trust and Savings Bank, a big Chicago Bank.

Indiana Farmer Wins $3,500!



This is a picture of Mr. C. H. Essig, Argos, Ind., taken on his farm. He writes: "Wish to acknowledge receipt of your $3,500 prize check. Oh, boy! This is the biggest sum of money I ever had in my hands. It is indeed a fortune to me."



Mrs. Kate Needham, of Oregon, won $4,700.00. Miss Lorene Barbush, of Wisconsin, won $1,125. M. D. Beukman of Minnesota, won $2,500. Hundreds of men, women, boys and girls have been rewarded in our past advertising campaigns.



$1,000.00 for Promptness

Send your answer at once. Make sure to qualify for $1,000 extra given for promptness if you win the Buick Sedan—a total of $3,700 if you prefer all cash.

Send No Money The same thing is—send in your answer today. You can share in this advertising cash distribution. Hurry! and take no chance of losing the extra reward of $1,000 for promptness if you win grand first prize. Act now. You don't need to send a penny of your money to win. Just find the Headless Horseman's head—mail with coupon or write me a letter at once for particulars.

Send Coupon Today

BOILER BOUTY, Mgr.,
417 W. Randolph, Dept. 186
Chicago, Illinois

The head that fits the rider is No. _____ I am entitled to win $3,700. Please tell me how I may.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____

CHECK that COLD . . . RELIEVE the THROAT



Listerine prevents because germicidal—Relieves because healing in action. No other antiseptic has both properties to such a degree

What follows is pretty convincing evidence of the remarkable power of full strength Listerine in warding off colds, and the ordinary sore throats that frequently accompany them.

That Listerine accomplishes such results is due, medical men tell us, to the fact that it is highly germicidal and at the same time *safe* and healing to tissue. It has none of the harsh characteristics of ordinary mouthwashes which irritate the membrane.

The tests outlined below, while not completely conclusive, corroborate scientifically what many millions of people have demonstrated practically. Read the results of the test:

⅓ as many colds

Of 102 persons observed for a period of seventy-five days, one-third, known as "controls," did not gargle with Listerine at all, one-third gargled twice a day, the other third five times a day.

Now, note these amazing results:

Those who did not gargle, contracted twice as many colds as those who gargled Listerine twice a day. The colds were four times as severe and lasted three times as long.

Three times as many colds

Those who did not gargle Listerine had three times as many colds as those who gargled five times a day. The colds were four times as severe and lasted four times as long.

The secret—germicidal action with safety.

Because of Listerine's amazing germicidal action it kills germs in the fastest time accurately recorded by science. So it reduces mouth bacteria 96% or more, and maintains substantial reduction for hours.

Equally responsible for Listerine's effectiveness is its absolute safety, its freedom from irritating properties. Contrast Listerine's soothing and healing effect on tissue to that of harsh mouthwashes which actually irritate it, thus allowing germs easy entrance.

Avoid imitations

When you go into a drug store ask for Listerine and see that you get it—and nothing else. Buy a bottle for your home and one for your office. Make a habit of gargling with it at least twice a day, and at the first sign of trouble increase the frequency of the gargle to from three to five times a day, and consult your physician. Lambert Pharmacal Co., St. Louis, Mo., U. S. A.



He pointed it at the incredible body.

The Planetoid of Peril

By Paul Ernst

HARLEY 2Q14N20 stopped for a moment outside the great dome of the Celestial Developments Company. Moodily he stared at their asteroid development chart. It showed, as was to be expected, the pick of the latest asteroid subdivision projects the Celestial Developments Company, established far back in 2045, would handle none but the very best. Small chance of his finding anything here!

Undaunted by crazy tales of an indestructible presence on Asteroid Z-40, Harley 2Q14N20 sets out alone to face and master it.

However, as he gazed at the chart, hope came suddenly to his face, and his heart beat high under his sapphire blue tunic. There was an asteroid left for sale there—one blank space among the myriad, pink-lettered Sold symbols. Could it be that here was the chance he had been hunting so desperately?

He bent closer to read the description of the sphere, and the hope faded gradually from his countenance. According to its orbit and

location, and the spectroscopic table of its mineral resources, it was a choice planetoid indeed. Of course such a rich little sphere, listed for sale by the luxurious Celestial Developments Company, would cost far more than he could ever rake together to pay for an asteroid.

Shaking his head, he adjusted his gravity regulator to give him about a pound and a half of weight, and started to float on. Then, his lips twisting at his own absurd hopefulness, he stopped again; and after another moment of indecision turned into the archway that led to the concern's great main office. After all, it wouldn't hurt to inquire the price, even though he knew in advance it would be beyond his humble means.

A YOUNGSTER in the pale green of the one-bar neophyte in business promptly glided toward him.

"Something for you to-day, sir?" he asked politely.

"Yes," said Harley. "I'm looking around for a planetoid; want to get a place of my own out a way from Earth. Something, you understand, that may turn out to be a profitable investment as well as furnishing an exclusive home-site. I see on your chart that you have a sphere left for sale, in the Red Belt, so I came in to ask about it."

"Ah, you mean asteroid Z-40," said the youngster, gazing with envious respect at the ten-bar insignia, with the crossed Sco drills, that proclaimed Harley to be a mining engineer of the highest rank. "Yes, that is still for sale. A splendid sphere, sir; and listed at a remarkably low figure. Half a million dollars."

"Half a million dollars!" exclaimed Harley. It was an incredibly small sum; scarcely the yearly salary of an unskilled laborer. "Are you sure that's right?"

"Yes, that's the correct figure. Down payment of a third, and the remaining two thirds to be paid out of the exploitation profits—"

HERE the conversation was interrupted by an elderly, grey-haired man with the six-bar dollar-mark insignia of a business executive on his purple tunic. He had been standing nearby, and at the mention of asteroid Z-40 had looked up alertly. He glided to the two with a frown on his forehead, and spoke a few curt words to the neophyte, who slunk away.

"Sorry, sir," he said to Harley. "Z-40 isn't for sale."

"But your young man just told me that it was," replied Harley, loath to give up what had begun to look like an almost unbelievable bargain.

"He was mistaken. It's not on the market. It isn't habitable, you see."

"What's wrong—hasn't it an atmosphere?"

"Oh, yes. One that is exceptionally rich in oxygen, as is true of all the spheres we handle. With a late model oxygen concentrator, one would have no trouble at all existing there."

"Is its speed of revolution too great?"

"Not at all. The days are nearly three hours long: annoying till you get used to it, but nothing like the inferior asteroids of the Mars Company where days and nights are less than ten minutes in duration."

"Well, is it barren, then? No minerals of value? No vegetation?"

"The spectroscope shows plenty of metals, including heavy radium deposits. The vegetation is as luxuriant as that of semi-tropic Earth."

"Then why in the name of Betelgeuse," said Harley, exasperated, "won't you sell the place to me? It's exactly what I've been looking for, and what I'd despaired of finding at my price."

"I'm forbidden to tell why it isn't for sale," said the executive, starting

to float off. "It might hurt our business reputation if the truth about that bit of our celestial properties became widely known— Oh, disintegrate it all! Why wasn't the thing erased from the chart weeks ago!"

"Wait a minute." Harley caught his arm and detained him. "You've gone too far to back out now. I'm too eager to find some such place as your Z-40 to be thrown off the subject like a child. *Why* isn't it for sale?"

THE man tightened his lips as though to refuse to answer, then shrugged.

"I'll tell you," he said at last. "But I beg of you to keep it confidential. If some of our investors on neighboring asteroids ever found out about the peril adjoining them on Z-40, they'd probably insist on having their money back."

He led the way to a more secluded spot under the big dome, and spoke in a low tone, with many a glance over his shoulder to see if anyone were within earshot.

"Z-40 is an exceptionally fine bit of property. It is commodious; about twenty miles in diameter. Its internal heat is such that it has a delightful climate in spite of the extreme rarity of atmosphere common to even the best of asteroids. It has a small lake; in fact it has about everything a man could want. Yet, as I said, it is uninhabitable."

His voice sank still lower.

"You see, sir, there's already a tenant on that sphere, a tenant that was in possession long before the Celestial Developments Company was organized. And it's a tenant that can't be bought off or reasoned with. It's some sort of beast, powerful, ferocious, that makes it certain death for a man to try to land there."

"A beast?" echoed Harley. "What kind of a beast?"

"We don't know. In fact we hardly even know what it looks like. But from what little has been seen of it, it's clear that it is like no other specimen known to universal science. It's something enormous, some freak of animal creation that seems invulnerable to man's smaller weapons. And that is why we can't offer the place for sale. It would be suicide for anyone to try to make a home there."

"*Has* anyone ever tried it?" asked Harley. "Any competent adventurer, I mean?"

"Yes. Twice we sold Z-40 before we realized that there was something terribly wrong with it. Both buyers were hardy, intrepid men. The first was never heard of after thirty-six hours on the asteroid. The second man managed to escape in his Blinco Dart, and came back to Earth to tell of a vast creature that had attacked him during one of the three-hour nights. His hair was white from the sight of it, and he's still in a sanitarium, slowly recovering from the nervous shock."

HARLEY frowned thoughtfully. "If this thing is more than a match for one man, why don't you send an armed band with heavy atomic guns and clear the asteroid by main force?"

"My dear sir, don't you suppose we've tried that? Twice we sent expensive expeditions to Z-40 to blow the animal off the face of the sphere, but neither expedition was able to find the thing, whatever it is. Possibly it has intelligence enough to hide if faced by overwhelming force. When the second expedition failed, we gave it up. Poor business to go further. Already, Z-40 has cost us more than we could clear from the sale of half a dozen planetoids."

For a long time Harley was silent. The Company was a hard headed, cold blooded concern. Anything that kept them from selling an asteroid must be terrible indeed.

His jaw set in a hard line. "You've been honest with me," he said at length. "I appreciate it. Just the same—I still want to buy Z-40. Maybe I can oust the present tenant. I'm pretty good with a ray-pistol."

"It would be poor policy for us to sell the asteroid. We don't want to become known as a firm that trades in globes on which it is fatal to land."

"Surely my fate is none of your worry?" urged Harley.

"The asteroid," began the executive with an air of finality, "is not for—"

"Man, it's got to be!" cried Harley. Then, with a perceptible effort he composed himself. "There's a reason. The reason is a girl. I'm a poor man, and she's heiress to fabulous— Well, frankly, she's the daughter of 3W28W12 himself!" The executive started at mention of that universally known number. "I don't want to be known as a fortune hunter; and my best bet is to find a potentially rich asteroid, cheap, and develop it—incidentally getting an exclusive estate for my bride and myself far out in space, away from the smoke and bustle of urban Earth. Z-40, save for the menace you say now has possession of it, seems to be just what I want. If I can clear it, it means the fulfillment of all my dreams. With that in view, do you think I'd hesitate to risk my neck?"

"NO," said the executive slowly, looking at the younger man's powerful shoulders and square-set chin and resolute eyes. "I don't think you would. Well, so be it. I'd greatly prefer not to sell you Z-40. But if you want to sign an agreement that we're released of all blame or responsibility in case of your death, you can buy it."

"I'll sign any agreement you please," snapped Harley. "Here is a down payment of a hundred and seventy thousand dollars. My name is Harley; sign 2Q14N20; unmarried—though I hope to change that soon, if I live—occupation, mining engineer, ten-bar degree; age, thirty-four. Now draw me up a deed for Z-40, and see that I'm given a stellar call number on the switchboard of the Radivision Corporation. I'll drop around there later and get a receiving unit. Good day." And, adjusting his gravity regulator to lighten his weight to less than a pound, he catapulted out the archway.

Behind him a prosaic business executive snatched a moment from a busy day to indulge in a sentimental flight of fancy. He had read once of curious old-time beings called knights, who had undertaken to fight and slay fire-eating things called dragons for the sake of an almost outmoded emotion referred to as love. It occurred to him that this brusque man of action might be compared to just such a being. He was undertaking to slay a dragon and win a castle for the daughter of 3W28W12—

The romantic thought was abruptly broken up by the numeral. It jarred so, somehow, that modern use of numbers instead of names, when thinking of sentimental passages of long ago. "The rose is fair; but in all the world there is no rose as fair as thou, my princess 3W28W12. . . ." No, it wouldn't do.

Cursing himself for a soft-headed fool, he went to deliver a stinging rebuke to somebody for not having blocked Z-40 off the asteroid chart weeks before.

"HARLEY 2Q14N20," recited the control assistant at Landon Field. "Destination, asteroid Z-40, Red Belt, arc 31.3470. Sights corrected, flight period twelve minutes, forty-eight seconds past nine o'clock. All set, sir?"

Harley nodded. He stepped in-

side the double shell of his new Blinco Dart—that small but excellent quantity-production craft that had entirely replaced the cumbersome space ships of a decade ago—and screwed down the man-hole lid. Then, with his hand on the gravity bar, he gazed out the rear panel, ready to throw the lever at the control assistant's signal.

The move was unthinkingly, mechanically made. Too many times had he gone through this process of being aimed by astronomical calculation, and launched into the heavens, to be much stirred by the wonder of it. The journey to Z-40 in the Dart was no more disquieting than, a century and a half ago, before the United States had fused together into one vast city, a journey from Chicago to Florida would have been in one of the inefficient gasoline-driven vehicles of that day.

All his thoughts were on his destination, and on a wonder as to what could be the nature of the thing that dwelt there.

He had just come from the sanitarium where the man who'd bought Z-40 before him was recovering from nervous exhaustion. He'd gone there to try to get first hand information about the creature the executive at the Celestial Developments Company had talked so vaguely of. And the tale the convalescent had told him of the thing on the asteroid was as fantastic as it was sketchy.

A tremendous, weirdly manlike creature looming in the dim night—a thing that seemed a part of the planetoid itself, fashioned from the very dirt and rock from which it had risen—a thing immune to the ray-pistol, that latest and deadliest of man-made small-arms—a thing that moved like a walking mountain and stared with terrible, stony eyes at its prey! That was what the fellow said he had faintly made out in the darkness before his nerves had finally given way.

HE had impressed Harley as being a capable kind of a person, too; not at all the sort to distort facts, nor to see imaginary figures in the night.

There was that matter of the stone splinter, however, which certainly argued that the wan, prematurely white-haired fellow was a little unbalanced, and hence not to be believed too implicitly. He'd handed it to Harley, and gravely declared it to be a bit of the monster's flesh.

"Why, it's only a piece of rock!" Harley had exclaimed before he could check himself.

"Did you ever see rock like it before?"

Turning it over in his hands, Harley had been forced to admit that he never had. It was of the texture and roughness of granite, but more heavily shot with quartz, or tridymite than any other granite he'd ever seen. It had a dull opalescent sheen, too. But it was rock, all right.

"It's a piece of the thing's hide," the man had told him. "It flaked off when it tried to pry open the man-hole cover of my Dart. A moment after that I got Radivision arc directions from Landon Field, aimed my sights, and shot for Earth. It was a miracle I escaped."

"But surely your ray-pistol—" Harley had begun, preserving a discreet silence about the man's delusion concerning the stone splinter.

"I tell you it was useless as a toy! Never before have I seen any form of life that could stand up against a ray-gun. But *this* thing *did!*"

THIS was another statement Harley had accepted with a good deal of reservation. He had felt sure the weapon the man had used had a leak in the power chamber, or was in need of recharging, or something of the kind. For it had been conclusively proved that all organic matter withered and burned away un-

der the impact of the Randchron ray.

Nevertheless, discounting heavily the convalescent's wild story, only a fool would have clung to a conviction that the menace on Z-40 was a trivial one. There was *something* on that asteroid, something larger and more deadly than Harley had ever heard of before in all his planetary wanderings.

He squared his shoulders. Whatever it was, he was about to face it, man against animal. He was reasonably certain his ray-gun would down anything on two legs or ten. If it didn't—well, there was nothing else that could; and he'd certainly provide a meal for the creature, assuming it ate human flesh....

A mechanic tapped against the rear view panel to recall his wandering attention. The control assistant held up his hands, fingers outspread, to indicate that there were ten seconds left.

Harley's hand went to his throat, where was hung a locket—a lovely but useless trinket of the kind once much worn by Earth women—and his fingers tightened tenderly on it. It had belonged to Beatrice 3W28W12's great-great-grandmother, and Beatrice had given it to him as a token.

"With luck, my dear," he whispered aloud. "With luck...."

There was a slight vibration. He threw the gravity bar over to the first notch. Earth dropped, plummet-like, away from him. He pushed the bar to the limit leg; and, at a rate of hundreds of miles a second, was repelled from Earth toward Z-40, and the thing that skulked there.

WITH a scarcely perceptible jar, he landed on the small sphere that, he hoped, was to be his future home. Before opening his man-hole lid, he went from panel to panel of the Dart and cautiously reconnoitered. He had elected to land beside the little lake that was set like a three hundred-acre gem on the surface of Z-40, and it was more than possible that the enemy had its den nearby.

However, a careful survey of the curved landscape in all directions failed to reveal a glimpse of anything remotely threatening. He donned his oxygen concentrator—in appearance a simple tube of a thing, projecting about six inches above his forehead, and set in a light metal band that encircled his head. Adjusting his gravity regulator so he wouldn't inadvertently walk clear off into empty space—he calculated his weight would be less than a twentieth of an ounce here—he stepped out of the Dart and gazed around at the little world.

Before him was the tiny lake, of an emerald green hue in the flashing sunlight. Around its shores, and covering the adjacent, softly rolling countryside as far as eye could reach, was a thick growth of carmine-tinted vegetation: squat, enormous-leaved bushes; low, sturdy trees, webbed together by innumerable vines. To left and right, miniature mountains reared ragged crests over the abbreviated horizon, making the spot he was in a peaceful, lovely valley.

He sighed. There was everything here a man could wish for—provided he could win it! Loosening his ray-pistol in its holster, he started to walk slowly around the lake to choose a site for the house he intended to build. On the opposite shore he found a place that looked suitable.

A FEW yards back from the water's edge, curling in a thick crescent like a giant sleeping on its side, was a precipitous outcropping of rock, curious stuff, rather like granite, that gleamed with dull opalescence in the brilliant sunlight. With that as a sort of natural buttress behind the house, and with the

beautiful lake as his front dooryard, he'd have a location that any man might envy.

He returned to his Dart, hopped back across the lake in it, and unloaded his Sco drill.* With this he planned to sink a shaft that would serve in the future as the cellar for his villa, and in the present as an entrenchment against danger.

But now the swift night of Z-40 was almost upon him. The low slant of the descending sun warned him that he had less than ten minutes of light left, until the next three-hour day should break over the eastern rim. He placed the drums and the flexible hose of the Sco drill so that he could begin operations with it as soon as the dawn broke, and started to walk toward the precipitous outcropping of quartziferous stone immediately behind the home-site he had picked. He would climb to the top of this for a short look around, and then return to the Dart—in which double-hulled, metal fortress he thought he would be safe from anything.

HE had almost reached the rock outcropping when the peculiarities of its outline struck him anew. He'd already observed that the craggy mound rather resembled a sleeping, formless giant. The closer he got to it the more the resemblance was heightened and the greater grew his perplexity.

It sprang straight up from the carmine underbrush, like a separate heap of stone cast there by some mighty hand. One end of it tapered down in a thick ridge; and this ridge had a deep, horizontal cleft running along it which made it appear as though it were divided into two leglike members. In the center the mound swelled to resemble a paunchy trunk with sagging shoulders. This was topped by a huge, nearly round ball that looked for all the world like a head. There were even rudimentary features. It was grotesque—one of those freak sculptures of nature, Harley reflected, that made it seem as though the Old Girl had a mind and artistic talent of her own.

He scrambled through the brush till he reached that part of the long mound that looked like a head. There, as the sun began to stream the red lines of its descent over the sky, he prepared to ascend for his view of the surrounding landscape.

He'd got within twenty feet of the irregular ball, and had adjusted his gravity regulator to enable him to leap to its top, when he stopped as abruptly as though he had been suddenly paralyzed. Over the two deep pits that resembled nostrils in the grotesque mask of a face he thought he had observed a quiver. The illusion had occurred in just the proper place for an eyelid. It was startling, to say the least.

"I'm getting imaginative," said Harley. He spoke aloud as a man tends to do when he is alone and uneasy. "I'd better get a tighter grip on my nerves, or—good God!"

COINCIDENT with the sound of his voice in the thin, quiet air, the huge stumps that looked like legs stirred slightly. A tremor ran through the entire mass of rock. And, directly in front of Harley, less than twenty feet from where he stood, a sort of half-moon-shaped curtain of rock slid slowly up to reveal an enormous, staring eye.

Frozen with a terror such as he

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*This implement, invented by Blanco 9X247A in 2052, is not so much a "drill" as a compressor. It is somewhat superficially defined in the Universal Dictionary, 2061 edition, as "a portable mechanism which, by alternating gaseous blasts of extreme heat and cold, breaks down the atoms of inorganic matter, causing them to collapse together in dense compression." Thus a cubic yard of earth can be reduced in size, in a few moments, to a pebble no larger than a pea; which pebble would weigh, on Earth, close to a ton.

had never felt before in a life filled with adventure, scarce breathing, Harley glared at the monstrous spectacle transpiring before him. A hill was coming to life. A granite cliff was growing animate. It was impossible, but it was happening.

The half-moon curtains of rock that so eerily resembled eyelids, blinked heavily. He could hear a faint rasping like the rustle of sandpaper, as they did so. One of the great leg stumps moved distinctly, independent of the other one. Three columnar masses of rock—arms, or tentacles, with a dozen hinging joints in each—slowly moved away from the parent mass near the base of the head, and extended toward the Earth man.

Still in his trance, with his heart pounding in his throat till he thought it would burst, Harley watched the further awful developments. The eyelids remained opened, disclosing two great, dull eyes, like poorly polished agates, which stared expressionlessly at him. There was a convulsion like a minor earthquake, and the mass shortened and heightened its bulk, raising itself to a sitting posture. The three hinged, irregular arms suddenly extended themselves to the full in a thrust that barely missed him. They were tipped, those arms, with immense claws, like interlocking, rough-hewn stone fingers. They crashed emptily together within a few feet of Harley. Then, and not till then, did the paralysis of horror loose its grip on the human.

He tore his ray-pistol from its holster and pointed it at the incredible body. An angry, blue-green cone of light leaped from the muzzle, and played over the mighty torso. Nothing happened. He squeezed the trigger back to the guard. The blue-green beam increased in intensity, and a crackling noise was audible. Under that awful power the monster should have disappeared, dissolved to a greasy mist. But it didn't.

THE light beam from the ray-gun died away. The power was exhausted. It was only good for about ten seconds of such an emergency, full-force discharge, after which it must be re-charged again. The ten seconds were up. And the gigantic creature against which it had been directed had apparently felt no injury from a beam that would have annihilated ten thousand men.

The now useless ray-pistol slipped from his limp fingers. Stupefied with horror at the futility of the deadly Randchron ray against this terrible adversary, he stood rooted to the spot. Then the thing reached for him again; and his muscles were galvanized to action—to instinctive, stupid, reasonless action.

Screaming incoherently, mad with horror of the stone claws that had clutched at him, he turned and ran. In great leaps he bounded away from the accursed lake and made for the taller trees and thicker vegetation at a distance from the shore. It was the worst thing he could have done. There was a chance that he could have reached his Dart, had he thought of it, and soared aloft out of reach. But he thought of nothing. All he wanted to do, in that abysmal fear that can still make a mindless animal out of a civilized man, was to run and hide—to get away from the fearful monster that had risen up to glare at him with those stony, pitiless eyes, and to reach for him with two-fingered hands like grinding rock vises.

JUST as the sun fell below the rim of the asteroid, plunging it into a darkness only faintly relieved by the light of the stars, he crashed into the deeper underbrush. A trailing creeper tripped him in his mad flight. He fell headlong, to lie panting, sobbing

for breath, in the thick carpet of blood-colored moss.

Behind him, from the direction of the lake, he heard a sudden clangor as of rock beating against metal. This endured only a short time. Then the solid ground beneath him shook slightly, and an appalling crash of trees and underbrush to the rear told him that the stone colossus was on his trail.

He leaped to his feet and continued his great bounds over the sharply curved surface of the asteroid, banging against tree trunks, bruising himself against stones, falling in the darkness to rise again and flee as before in a mad attempt to distance the crashing sound of pursuit behind him.

Then he felt himself writhing in thin air as his flying course took him over the edge of a cliff. Down, down he fell, to land in a dense bed of foliage far below. Something hit his head with terrific force. Pinwheels of light flashed before his eyes, to fade into velvety nothingness. . . .

SLOWLY, uncertainly he wavered back to consciousness. For a moment he was aware of nothing save that he was lying on some surface that was jagged and uncomfortable, and that it was broad daylight. He opened his eyes, and saw that he was reclining across a springy bed formed of the top of a tree. Ahead of him loomed a cliff about a hundred feet high.

Remembrance suddenly came to him. The unreasoning rush through the underbrush. The nightmare creature lumbering swiftly after him. The fall over the cliff into the top of this tree.

With a cry, he sat up, expecting to see the stone giant nearby and poised to leap. But it was nowhere in sight; nor, listen as intently as he would, could he hear the sounds of its crashing path through the brush. Somehow, for the moment at least, he had been saved. Perhaps his disappearance over the cliff edge had thrown it off his track.

He became aware of the fact that it was difficult for him to breathe. His lungs were heaving in a vain effort to suck in more oxygen, and his tongue felt thick as though he were being strangled. Then he saw that his oxygen concentrator had been knocked from his head when he fell, and was dangling from a limb several feet away. It was almost out of breathing range. Had it fallen on through the branches to the ground he would have died, in his unconsciousness, in the rarified atmosphere. He reached for it; settled the band around his head again.

After once more listening and peering around to make sure the rock colossus was not about, he descended the tree that had saved his life, and began to walk in the direction he judged the lake to be. He would get into his Dart, cruise aloft out of harm's way, and perhaps think up some effective course of action.

HE was thinking clearly, now. And, in the glare of daylight, no longer an unreasoning animal fleeing blindly over a dim-lit foreign sphere, he was unable to understand his panic of the night. Afraid? Of course he had been afraid! What man wouldn't have been at sight of that monstrous thing? But that he, Harley 2Q14N20, should have lost his head completely and gone plunging off into the brush like that, seemed unbelievable. To the depths of his soul he felt ashamed. And to his own soul he made the promise that he would wipe out, in action, that hour of cowardice.

As he wound his way through the squat, carmine forest, he tried to figure out the nature of the thing that had crashed balefully after him in the black hours.

It had seemed made of rock—a giant, primitive stone statue imbued

with life. But it was impossible that it should really be fashioned of rock. At least it ought to be impossible. Rock is inorganic, inanimate. It simply couldn't have the spark of life in it. Harley had seen many strange creations, on many strange planets, but never had he seen inorganic mineral matter endowed with animation. Nor had anyone else.

YET the thing *looked* as though made of stone. Of some peculiar, quartz-suffused granite—proving that the wan, white-haired man he had talked to in the sanitarium had not been mad at all, but only too terribly sane. The creature's very eyes had had a stony look. Its eyelids had rasped like stone curtains rubbing together. Its awful, two-fingered hands, or claws, had ground together like stones rubbing.

Was it akin to the lizards, the cold-blooded life of Earth? Was this rocky exterior merely a horny shell, like that of a turtle? No. Horn is horn and rock is rock. The two can't be confused.

The only theory Harley could form was that the great beast was in some strange way a link between the animal and the mineral kingdoms. Its skeletal structure, perhaps, was silicate in substance, extending to provide an outside covering that had hardened into actual stone, while forming an interior support to flesh that was half organic, half inorganic matter. Some such silicate construction was to be found in the sponge, of Earth. Could this be a gigantic relative of that lowly creature? He did not know, and couldn't guess. He wasn't a zoologist. All he knew was that the thing appeared to be formed of living, impregnable stone. He knew, also, that this fabulous creature was bent on destroying him.

At this point in his reflections, the glint of water came to his eyes between the tree trunks ahead of him. He had come back to the lake.

FOR moments he stood behind one of the larger trees on the fringe and searched around the shore for sight of the rock giant. It was nowhere in evidence. Rapidly he advanced from the forest and ran for the Dart. From a distance it appeared to be all right; but as he drew near a cry rose involuntarily to his lips.

In a dozen places the double hull of the little space craft was battered in. The man-hole lid was torn from its braces and bent double. The glass panels, unbreakable in themselves, had been shoved clear into the cabin; their empty sash frames gaped at Harley like blinded eyes. Never again would that Blinco Dart speed through the heavens!

He went to the spot where he had left his Sco drill, and a further evidence of the thing's cold blooded ferocity was revealed. The intricate mechanism had been wrenched into twisted pieces. The drums were battered in and the flexible hose lengths torn apart in shreds. The inventor himself couldn't have put it in working order again.

He was hopelessly trapped. He had no means of fighting the colossus. He had no way of escaping into space, nor of returning to Earth and trying to raise a loan that would allow him to come back here with men and atomic guns. He hadn't even a way of intrenching himself in the ground against the next attack.

FOR an instant his hair prickled in a flash of the blind panic that had seized him a few hours before. With a tremendous effort of will he fought it down. This—the destruction of his precious Dart and drill—was the result of one siege of insensate fear. If he succumbed to another one he might well dash straight into the arms of death. He sank to the ground and rested his chin on his fist, concentrating all his intellect on the hopeless problem that faced him.

The surface of Z-40 was many square miles in extent. But, if he tried to hide himself, he knew it was only a question of time before he would be hunted down. The asteroid was too tiny to give him indefinite concealment. Flight, then, was futile.

But if he didn't try to conceal himself in the sparse forest lands, it meant that he must stay to face the monster at once—which was insanity. What could he do, bare-handed, against that thirty-foot, three-tentacled, silicate mass of incredible life!

It was useless to run, and it was madness to stay and confront the thing. What, then, could he do? The sun had slid down the sky and the red of another swift dusk was heralding the short night before he shook his head somberly and gave the fatal riddle up.

He rose to his feet, intending to make his way back to the concealment—such as it was—of the forest. It might be that he could find safety in some lofty treetop till day dawned again. Then he stopped, and listened. What was that?

From far away to the left he could hear faint sounds of some gargantuan stirring. And, coincident with the flickering out of the last scrap of sunlight, a distant crashing came to his ears as an enormous body smashed like an armored ship through trees and thorn bushes and trailing vines. The rock thing had found his trail and was after him again.

A SECOND time Harley fled through the dim-lighted night, stumbling over boulders and tripping on creepers. But this time his flight was not that of panic. Frightened enough, he was; but his mind was working clearly as he leaped through the forest away from the source of the crashing.

The first thing he noted was that though—as far as his ears could inform him—he was managing to keep his lead, he wasn't outdistancing his horrible pursuer by a yard. Dark though the night was, and far away as he contrived to keep himself, the colossus seemed to cling to his trail as easily as though following a well-blazed path.

He climbed a tree, faced at right angles to the course he had pursued, and swung for the next tree. It was a long jump. But desperation lent abnormal power to his muscles, and the gravity regulator, adjusted to extremely low pitch, was a great help. He made it safely. Another swinging leap into the dark, to land sprawling in a second tree; a third; a fourth. Finally he crouched in a tangle of boughs, and listened. He was a quarter of a mile from the point where he had turned from his first direction. Perhaps this deviation would throw the rock terror off.

It didn't. He heard the steady smashing noise stop. For an instant there was a silence in the darkness of the asteroid that was painful. Then the crashing was resumed, this time drawing straight toward where he was hidden. Somehow the thing had learned of his change of direction.

He continued his flight into the night, his eyes staring glassily into the darkness, his expression the ghastly one of a condemned man. And as he fled the crashing behind him told how he was followed—easily, infallibly, in spite of all his twisting and turning and efforts at concealment. What hellish intelligence the monster must possess!

HE ran for eternities. He ran till his chest was on fire, and the sobbing agony of his breathing could be heard for yards. He ran till spots of fire floated before his eyes and the blood, throbbing in his brain, cut out the noise of the devilish pursuit behind him. At long last his legs

buckled under him, and he fell, to rise no more.

He was done. He knew it. His was the position of the hunted animal that lies panting, every muscle paralyzed with absolute exhaustion, and glares in an agony of helplessness at the hunter whose approach spells death.

The crashing grew louder. The tremor of the ground grew more pronounced as the vast pursuer pounded along with its tons and tons of weight. Harley gazed into the blackness back along the way he had come, his eyes sunk deep in the hollows fatigue had carved in his face, and waited for the end. The dark night darkened still more with the approach of another swift, inexorable dawn.

There was a terrific rending of tree trunks and webbed creepers. Dimly in the darkness he could see something that towered on a level with the tallest trees, something that moved as rapidly and steadily as though driven by machinery. Fear so great that it nauseated him, swept over him in waves; but he could not move.

The first grey smear of dawn appeared in the sky. In the ghostly greyness he got a clearer and clearer sight of the monster. He groaned and cowered there while it approached him—more slowly now, eyeing him with staring, stony orbs in which there was no expression of any kind, of rage or hate, of curiosity or triumph.

Great stumps of legs, with no joints in them, on which the colossus stalked like a moving stone tower—a body resembling an enormous boulder carved by an amateurish hand to portray the trunk of a human being—a craggy sphere of rock for a head, set directly atop the deeply riven shoulders—a face like the horrible mask of an embryonic gargoyle—a mouth that was simply a lipless chasm that opened and closed with the sound of rocks grinding together in a slow-moving glacier—the whole veiled thinly by trailing lengths of snapped vines, great shattered tree boughs, bushes, all uprooted in its stumping march through the forest! Harley closed his eyes to shut out the sight. But in spite of himself they flashed open again and stared on, as though hypnotized by the spectacle they witnessed.

THE grey of dawn lightened to the first rose tint of the rising sun. As though stung to action by the breaking of day, the thing hastened its ground-shaking pace. With one last stride, it came to Harley's side and loomed far above, the unwinking eyes glaring down at him.

The three arms, hinged at equidistant points at the base of the horrible head, slowly lowered toward his prostrate form. There was a grating noise as the creature hinged in the middle and bent low, bringing its enormous, staring eyes within two yards of his face.

One of its hands closed over his leg, tentatively, experimentally, as though to ascertain of what substance he was made. He cried aloud as the rock vise, like a gigantic lobster's claw, squeezed tight. The thing drew back abruptly. Then the chasm of its mouth opened a little, for all the world as though giving vent to soundless, demoniac laughter. All three of the vise-like hands clamped over him—lightly enough, considering their vast size, and intimating that the colossus did not mean to kill him for a moment or two—but so cruelly that his senses swam with the pain of it.

He felt the grip relax. The vast stone pincers were lifted from him; slithered to the ground beside him.

The first blinding rays of the sun were beating straight on the colossal figure, which glittered fantastically, like a huge splintered opal, in their brilliance

It glared down at Harley. The abyss of a mouth opened as though again giving vent to silent, infernal laughter. Then, with the noise of a landslide, the giant form settled slowly to the ground. The rock half-moons of curtains dropped over the expressionless, dull eyes. The whole great figure quivered, and grew still. It lay without movement, stretched along the ground like a craggy, opalescent hill.

DAZED, stunned by such fantastic behavior, Harley struggled wearily to his feet. He had been a dead man as surely as though shot with a ray-gun. One twitch of those terrible rock pincers would have broken him in two pieces. It had seemed as though that deadly twitch were surely forthcoming. And then the thing had released him—and had lain down to go to sleep! Or was it asleep?

He took a few slow steps away from it, expecting to see the three great tentacles flash out to capture him as a cat claws at a mouse that thinks it is escaping. The arms didn't move. Astounding as it was, Harley was free to run away if he chose. Why was that?

A hint of a clue to the creature's action began to unfold in his mind. When he had first laid eyes on it, in daylight, it was asleep. It had not pursued him during the preceding day, which argued that again it was asleep. And now, with the first touch of dawn, it was once more quiet, immobile.

The answer seemed to be that it was entirely nocturnal; that for some obscure, unguessable reason sunlight induced in it a state of suspended animation. It seemed an insane theory, but no other surmise was remotely reasonable.

But if it were invariably sunk in a coma during daylight, why had it delayed killing him just a moment ago? Its every act indicated that it possessed intelligence of a high order. It was more than probable that it realized its limitation—why hadn't it acted in accordance with that realization?

On thinking it over, he believed he had the answer to that, too. He remembered the way the gaping mouth had seemed to express devilish mirth. The thing was playing with him. That was all. It had saved him for another night of hopeless flight and infallible trailing through the forests of Z-40.

HE gazed at the monster in a frenzy of impotent rage and fear. If only he could kill it somehow in its sleep! But he couldn't. In no way could he harm it. Secure in its silicate covering, it was impervious to his wildest attempts at destruction. And it knew it, too; hadn't it laughed just before sinking down to slumber through the asteroidal day?

With his Sco drill he might have pierced that silicon dioxid armor till he reached the creature's gritty flesh. Then he could have used his ray-pistol, possibly disintegrating all its vitals and leaving only an empty rock shell sprawling hugely there in the trampled underbrush.

But he had neither drill nor pistol. The one had been wrecked by the monster; the other he had dropped in his madness of fright, after completely exhausting its power chamber.

Half crazed by the hopelessness of his plight, he paced up and down beside the great length of animated stone. Trapped on an asteroid—utterly unarmed—alone with the most pitiless, invulnerable creation Nature had placed in a varied universe! Could Hell itself have devised a more terrible fate?

Shuddering, he turned away. He had some two and a half hours of grace, before the sun should set again and darkness release the colos-

sus from its torpor. There was only one thing he could do: place the diameter of the sphere between the thing and himself, and try to exist through another night of terror.

His hands went to his belt to adjust the gravity regulator strapped about his waist. By reducing his weight to an ounce or two, he could make the long journey possible for his fatigue-numbed muscles—

His hands clenched into fists, and his breath whistled between his set teeth as a wild hope came to him. The touch of the regulator had brought inspiration.

A way to defeat the gigantic creature stretched on the ground beside him! A way to banish it forever from the surface of this lovely little world where all was perfect but the monstrous thing with which it was cursed!

TREMBLING with the reaction wrought in him by the faint glow of hope, he began to race toward the lake and his wrecked Blinco Dart. It wasn't hard to find the way; the rock giant had left a trail as broad as a road: trees broken off like celery stalks, bushes smashed flat, tracks that looked like shallow wells sunk into the firm ground. Fifty yards to a step, he leaped along this path, praying that one object, just one bit of machinery in the Dart had escaped the general wreckage.

Arrived at the little shell at last, he was forced to pause a moment and compose himself before he could step into the battered interior. Everything hinged on this one final chance!

Drawing a long breath, he entered the cabin and made his way to the stern repellor. A groan escaped his lips. It was ruined. Evidently the thing had reached in the man-hole opening with one of its three mighty tentacles, and, with sure instinct, had fastened its stone claws on the repellor housing. At any rate, it was ground to bits. But—there was the bow repellor.

He went to that, and the flame of hope came back to his eyes. It was untouched! He threw back the housing to make sure. Yes, the inter-sliding series of plates, that reversed or neutralized gravitational attraction at a touch, were in alignment.

He bent to the task of disconnecting it from the heavy bed-plate to which it was bolted, his fingers flying frenziedly. Then back to the torpid colossus he hurried, clutching the precious repellor tight in his arms lest he should drop it, walking carefully lest he should fall with it.

There he was faced by a new difficulty that at first seemed insurmountable. How could he fasten the repellor to that great, impenetrable, opalescent bulk?

A second time he bounded back toward the Dart, to return with the heavy blow and stern bed-plates from its hull.

ONCE more the orange ball of the sun was sinking low. The terrible brevity of those three-hour days! He had less than ten minutes, Earth time, in which to work.

One of the thing's arms, or tentacles, was pointing out away from the parent mass. It was twice the diameter of his body, and was ponderously heavy, but by rigging a fulcrum and lever device, with a stone as the fulcrum and a tough log as the lever, he managed to raise it high enough to thrust one of the bed-plates under it. The other massive metal sheet he laid across the top.

The lower rim of the sun touched the horizon. A tremor ran through the colossus. In frantic haste, racing against the flying seconds, Harley clamped the two plates tight against the columnar tentacle with four long hull-bolts from the Dart. He set the repellor in position on the top bed-plate, and began to fasten it down.

He felt another tremor run through the stone column on which he was squatting. With a rasping sound, one of the half-moon rock-curtains the thing had for eyelids blinked open and shut. He shot the last bolt into place and tightened it.

The stone claws, just behind which he had fastened the repellor, ground savagely shut. The great tentacle began to lift, and carried him with it—toward the chasm of a mouth. That chasm opened wide. . . .

Harley straightened up and jumped for the ground. As he jumped, he kicked the repellor control bar hard over.

There was a shrieking of wind as though all the hurricanes in the universe were battling each other. He felt himself turned over and over, buffeted, torn at, in a mad aerial whirlpool. The whirlpool calmed as the abruptly created vacuum, caused by the monster's rapid drive upward, passed after it into space. Far overhead there was one fleeting glimpse of a pinpoint of dull opalescence reflecting the rays of the dying sun. Then the pinpoint disappeared in fathomless space. With his gravity regulator adjusted to the point where it almost neutralized his weight, he fell slowly back toward the ground. . . .

ALMOST immediately after he had landed in the darkness that blanketed the surface of the planetoid, a big space yacht settled down near him. A searchlight bored a hole in the blackness, to bathe him in cold light. Down the beam came a band of men from Earth, pushing atomic cannon and gazing apprehensively about them. In the lead was an elderly man with the six-bar dollar-mark insignia of a business executive on his purple tunic.

He hastened to Harley's side. Harley only dimly heard what he said. Something to the effect that the man had been worried after selling the fatal asteroid. Had got in touch with the Radivision Corporation and learned that this call number was dead. Had come with men and big guns to rescue him, if it wasn't too late, and take him back to Earth. Had cruised for half an hour before locating him. "I've been calling myself a murderer ever since I let you have Z-40, Mr. 2Q14N20," he concluded. "I was sure we'd get here only to find you'd been killed. But I see you've managed to escape from the creature so far—though by the look of you, it must have been a narrow shave."

At this Harley shook off some of the gathering dizziness that hazed his mind. He threw back his shoulders. "Managed to *escape?* I did better than that. I got rid of the thing forever! Yes, I'll return to Earth with you, but only because I need a new Blinco Dart. I'm coming back to Z-40 at once. Perfect little paradise, now that I've got rid of that—animated—rock pile—"

The belated rescuers caught him as he collapsed.

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Hawk Carse

A Complete Novelette

By Anthony Gilmore

CHAPTER I

The Swoop of the Hawk

HAWK CARSE came to the frontiers of space when Saturn was the frontier planet, which was years before the swift Patrol ships brought Earth's law and order to those vast regions. A casual glance at his slender figure made it seem impossible that he was to rise to be the greatest adventurer in space, that his name was to carry such deadly connotation in later years. But on closer inspection, a number of little things became evident: the steadiness of his light gray eyes; the marvelously strong-fin-

One of the spectacular exploits of Hawk Carse, greatest of space adventurers.



The Hawk stood there, both arms hanging easily at his sides.

gered hands, the wiry build of his splendidly proportioned body. Summing these things up and adding the brilliant resourcefulness of the man, the complete ignorance of fear, one could perhaps understand why even his blood enemy, the impassive Ku Sui, a man otherwise devoid of every human-trait, could not face Carse unmoved in his moments of cold fury.

His name, we know, enters most histories of the period 2117—2148 A. D., for he has at last been recognized as the one who probably did most—unofficially, and not with the authority of the Earth Government—to shape the raw frontiers of space, to push them outward and to lay the foundations of the present tremendous commerce between Earth, Vulcan, Pluto, Neptune, Uranus, Saturn and Jupiter. But, little of his fascinating character may be gleaned from the dry words

of history; and it is Hawk Carse the adventurer, he of the spitting ray-gun and the phenomenal draw, of the reckless space ship maneuverings, of the queer bangs of flaxen hair that from a certain year hid his forehead, of the score of blood feuds and the one great feud that jarred nations in its final terrible settling—it is with that man we are concerned here.

A number of his exploits never recorded are still among the favorite yarns spun by lonely outlanders in the scattered trading posts of the planets, and among them is that of his final encounter with Judd the Kite. It shows typically the cold deadliness, the prompt repaying of a blood debt, the nerveless daring that were the outstanding qualities of this almost legendary figure.

It began one crisp, early morning on Iapetus, and it ended on Iapetus, with the streaks of ray-guns searing the air; and it explains why there are two square mounds of soil on Iapetus, eighth satellite of Saturn.

CARSE pioneered Iapetus and considered its product his by right of prior exploration. One or two men had landed there before he came to the frontiers of space and reported the satellite habitable, possessed of gravital force only slightly under Earth's, despite its twelve-hundred-mile diameter, and of an atmosphere merely a trifle rarer; but they had gone no further. They had noticed the forms of certain strange animals flitting through the satellite's jungles, but had not investigated. It was Carse who captured one of the creatures and saw the commercial possibilities of the pointed seven-inch horn that grew on its head, and who named it phanti, after the now extinct Venusian bird-mammal.

There were great herds of them, and they constituted Iapetus' highest form of life. The space trader cut off a few of their opalescent and green-veined horns and sent them as samples to Earth; and, upon their being valued highly, he two months later established his ranch on Iapetus, and thus laid the foundation for the grim business that men sometimes call the Exploit of the Hawk and the Kite.

No doubt Carse expected trouble over the ranch. To protect the valuable twice-yearly harvest of horn from Ku Sui's several bands of pirates, and other semi-piratical traders who roamed space, he built a formidable ranch-house with generators for powerful offensive rays and a strong defensive ray-web, and manned it with six competent men. Moreover, he came personally twice a year to transport the cargo of horn, and let it be known throughout the frontiers that the sign of the Hawk was on that portion of Iapetus, and that all who trespassed would have to answer to him. This should have been, ordinarily, enough. But there was always the sinister, brilliant Dr. Ku Sui, plotting against him and his belongings, and reckless others to whom the ranch might look like easy pickings. From these Carse had long anticipated a raid on Iapetus.

AND now he was worried. Clad as usual in a faded blue tunic, open at the neck, soft blue trousers and old-fashioned rubber soled shoes, he showed it by pulling occasionally at the bangs of flaxen hair that had been trained to hang down his forehead to the thick, straw-colored eyebrows. In his new cruiser, the *Star Devil*, he was within an hour's time of Iapetus, which lay before the bow observation ports of the control cabin like a giant buff-tinted orange, dark-splotched by seas and jungles, on the third of

his semi-annual voyages for the harvest of horn. Away to the left, scintillating and flaming in the blackness of space, whirled Saturn, his rings clear-cut and brilliant, his hard light filling the control cabin. Carse was staring unseeingly at the magnificent spectacle when the giant negro standing nearby at the space-stick rumbled:

"Well, suh, Ah cain't think they's anything wrong—no, suh. They's nobody'd *dare* touch that ranch! No, suh—not Hawk Carse's ranch."

This was "Friday," the herculean black Earthling whom Carse had rescued years before from one of the Venusian slave-ships, and now a member of that strange trio of totally dissimilar comrades, the third of whom was Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow, now absent and at work in his secret laboretory. Friday thought the Hawk just about the greatest man in the Solar System, and many times already had he given proof of his devotion.

Carse looked full at him.-"You're a good mechanic, Eclipse," he said, "but in some ways very innocent. Crane hasn't replied to us for seventy minutes. He knows we're coming and he should be on duty. That cargo's valuable, and it's all ready and packed."

"Hmff," Friday grunted. "But who you think'd dare try an' swipe it when we're so close? One o' Ku Sui's gang, maybe?"

"Perhaps. I haven't heard anything of Ku Sui for some time, and he's never more dangerous than when he keeps silent," said the Hawk thoughtfully. "But Crane might be sick. Or his radio might have broken down temporarily. Still—"

It was then that the third man in the cabin, Harkness, the navigator, straightened abruptly and put a sharp end to the trader's last word by calling out:

"Radio, sir!"

A RED dot of light was winking on a switchboard. Friday watched the Hawk move in his quick, effortless way to it and pull a lever down, all in the same motion, and then the negro's neck muscles corded as he listened to the sounds that came, choking and barely intelligible, from a loud-speaker:

"Carse—Hawk Carse—Crane speaking from the ranch. We're besieged—pirate ship—outnumbered—can't hold out much longer. We got most of the cargo inside here, but our generators—they're weakening—and I'm fading, I guess, and the others that're left are wounded. Carse—hurry—hurry. . . ."

Five words went back into the microphone before the receiver went dead.

"I'm coming, Crane! Hold on!"

Friday had seen the Hawk in such moments before, and he knew the sight; but the navigator, Harkness, had not been with Carse very long, and now he stood silent, motionless, while despite himself a shiver ran down his spine as he stared at the tight-pressed bloodless lips and the gray eyes, cold now as space. He started nervously when the Hawk turned and looked him in the eye.

"I want speed," came his quiet, soft, deceptive voice. "I want that hour's running time sliced by a third. Streak through that atmosphere."

"Yes, suh!" answered Friday.

"And you"—to Harkness—"be very sure you get out every ounce she's got. Tell the engineer personally."

"Full speed. Yes, sir," said the navigator, and felt relieved when Carse turned his eyes away. For the Hawk, as always when he learned that property had been ravaged and his friends shot down, seemed less human than the Indrots at the far end of the frigid deeps

of space he roamed. His face was mask-like, graven, totally expressionless. blood had been shed, and for each ounce another had to be spilled to balance the scales. At a speaking tube that reached aft to the three other members of the crew, he whispered. "Fighting posts. Arm and be ready for action. Pirates are attacking ranch," and then went noiselessly to the forward electelscope. Meanwhile Friday kept his eyes strictly on the dials before him and held the space-stick rigid, while aft, in the ship's other compartments, three men strapped on ray-gun belts and wondered who was doomed to be caught in the swoop of the Hawk.

CARSE himself wondered that. The raider so far showed as a newcomer to the frontiers of space, he was one who as yet had never faced the Hawk, one to whom the tales that were told of him seemed laughable, to whom the rich consignment of horn looked like a gift. Certainly such an open attack did not resemble Ku Sui's subtle methods, or those of his several henchmen, pirates of space all; they, rather, struck behind his back, and then only when the infamous Eurasian had prepared what seemed an escape-proof trap.

"Foolish to raid when I'm so close!" he murmured as he trained the electelscope and peered into its eye-piece "Stupid! Unless . . ."

Friday, at the space-stick, mopped the trickles of sweat from his brow and with a vast sigh shifted his bulk The job of speeding into an atmospheric pressure was always ticklish, and it was with some relief that he reported "Into th' atmosphere, suh," according to routine He waited for the usual acknowledgment, and when it did not come repeated his observation in a louder voice. Two full minutes of silence passed. Then, finally, Hawk Carse turned from the electelscope, and even the negro shivered at sight of the deady mask that was his face.

For the ranch-house in its clearing had dimly appeared in the electelscope just as Friday had spoken.

Carse spoke.

"More speed, if it burns us up," came his almost whispered words. "I want much more speed."

Harkness gulped. "Yes, sir," he said, and, moistening his lips, he returned to the engine-room. The frigid gray eyes swung back to the sight that was revealed on Iapetus.

The long, lean shape of a rakish space ship was resting on the soil some three hundred yards from the ranch-house, and between were the hazy figures of six men, busily dragging as many boxes towards their craft. The boxes contained the whole half-year's harvest of phanti horns, and had obviously been looted from the house. The resistance had been overcome; the pirate raid had succeeded. The trim, gray-painted ranch-house was lifeless. . . .

THE Hawk switched off the electelscope. His colorless lips were compressed very tightly. "I'll take the helm," he said curtly to Friday. "Turn on the defensive web, and prepare all ray batteries."

"Yes, suh!" The negro's big, yellow-palmed hands worked dexterously among the instruments to his right; then, amidships, grew a shrill whine which keened upward in pitch. A few sparks raced by the *Star Devil's* after ports, quickly to disappear after they left the almost invisible envelope of delicate bluish light that entirely wrapped her hull

She was making dangerous speed. The wind screamed as she streaked through the satellite's atmosphere, and the great friction of her passage raised her outer shell to a

perilous glow. The altitude dial's finger almost jumped from forty thousand to thirty-five.

"Ready for bow-ray salvo."

"Aye, sir!" replied Harkness, and a moment later repeated crisply: "All ready for bow-ray salvo, sir!" His voice showed no sign of the fear within him—fear that the *Star Devil's* outer hull would reach the melting point—but his lips fell apart and his face lost its discipline when the Hawk next spoke and acted.

"Steady," came the low whisper to his ears—and he saw the controlling space-stick being shoved down as far as it would go.

CHAPTER II

Pursuit

THAT was the Hawk's method, and it had given him the name which he had made famous. It was characteristic of the man that he preferred to strike at an enemy ship in a wild, breath-taking swoop, even as the fierce hawk plummets from high heaven to sink its talons deep into the flesh of its more sluggish prey. Nerves were uncomfortable things to have on such occasions, and Harkness had them, and accordingly he felt his heart hammer and something tight seemed to bind his throat. He tried to assume the unshakable calmness of the motionless figure at the stick, but could not, for his body was only flesh and blood—and Hawk Carse was tempered, frosty steel. Through staring eyes the navigator watched the surface of Iapetus rushing into the bow ports, watched it spread accelerating outward, until he could plainly see the pirate ship lying there, and the nearby figures of men tugging at the heavy boxes of horns.

His eyes were on those figures when they broke. First they teetered hesitantly a moment, glancing wildly around and up at the vision of death that was coming like a silver comet from the skies, and then they melted apart. Three scrambled towards the rim of jungle foliage close at hand, while their fellows leaped in the other direction, trying to make an open port in their craft. Harkness saw them tumble headlong through it and slam it shut. Then a web of blue streaks appeared around the ship, and softened until her hull was bathed in ghostly bluish light.

"Their defensive ray-web's on, sir!" he managed to gasp. Carse, though close, might not have heard, so intently was he watching. The altitude dial's pointer reached for one thousand and slid past. Harkness's face was pale and drawn; his tight-gripped fingers and clenched teeth showed that he expected to crash into the ground in a molten, shapeless tomb of steel. But Friday was grinning, his teeth a slash of white.

"Stand by bow projectors," sounded the Hawk's clipped voice. The negro extended his hands and rumbled:

"Ready, suh."

"Fire."

"Fire!" Friday roared.

His rich laugh rang out and he whirled the wheels over. With a hissing as of a hundred snakes, the rays struck.

WELL aimed, the bolt speared straight and true. The distance was short, and it came from generators that were perhaps not equaled in space; no ordinary ship's defensive web could resist its vicious thrust. From the streak of silver that represented the Hawk's swoop, a stream of orange cut a swathe through the air ahead, holding accurately on the brigand ship. For just a tick of time there was a turmoil of color as offensive ray met defensive web; then the

air cleared again—and the pirate was unmarked!

By rights she should have been split in two, and, though his face did not show it, it must have been surprising to Carse that she wasn't. With one flick of the wrist he wrenched the *Star Devil* out of her plunge and sent her scudding, a hundred feet up, over the jungle rim. Friday was gaping. Harkness, still numb from the dive, foolishly staring; and then the brigand bared her fangs in return.

Orange light winked from her stern, and the Hawk's ship was bathed in a streak of color. But the bolt caromed harmlessly off the side of the arc-ing *Star Devil!* and the next instant the pirate's lean bulk swayed, lifted a little and zoomed up into the heavens, abandoning the boxes of horn without further fight.

"Runnin' foh it! Scared stiff!" muttered Friday, unholy joy in his gleaming eyes. He looked at the figure at the stick. "Follow 'em now, suh, an' wear out their projectors?"

Carse thoughtfully smoothed his bangs with his free hand. "Plenty of time for that," he said patiently. "Some of the men on the ranch may still be alive: we must care for them. I'm going to land. Tell the engineer to keep watch through the electelescope on that ship. I'll start overtaking it shortly."

"Funny our rays didn't ha'm 'em," Friday ruminated aloud. "Ain't no ordinary craft, that. No, suh, they's more in this heah business than hits yo' eyes!"

"Now you're getting cynical, Eclipse," the Hawk said dryly

A QUARTER-MILE-SQUARE block of land had been fenced off as a corral for the ninety-head herd of bull phantis Carse kept on Iapetus. These creatures resembled mostly the old ostrich of Earth, but grew no feathers. The neck, however was shorter than the ostrich's; the leathery skin of a drab gray color; the powerful hind feet, on which they stood erect, prehensile and armed with short stabbing spurs; the forearms short and used for plucking the delicate shoots and young leaves on which they lived. There was a dim flicker of rudimentary intelligence inside the bullet heads; they recognized men as their enemies, and hated them. And therefore they necessitated careful handling, for, even without the valuable head-horns, their sharp-spurred feet could rip a human being into shreds in seconds.

They were clustered now behind the wire corral-fence, electrified to prevent them from breaking through. They bellowed angrily and shoved each other about as their wicked little blood-shot eyes caught sight of the *Star Devil* as she came dropping gently down.

At the electelescope of the descending craft was the ship's engineer. He had just centered the instrument on the fleeing pirate craft that by now was leaving the satellite's atmosphere, and the image was large on the screen above the bow windows, where he kept a steady eye on it. The inner door of the port-lock swung open, the outer door down, and Carse walked through, followed by Friday and Harkness.

An ugly scene lay spread out before them in the glaring daylight. The trader had only gone a few paces when he paused and looked down at an outsprawled thing that had once been a man. Stooping, he very gently turned the mess of charred flesh over and peered at what was left of the face. There were small, burnt holes in it, and the flesh surrounding them looked as though it had been suspended for some time over a slow fire. . . .

Carse rose and stared into space.

"Ruthera, a guard," he said softly, as if speaking to himself. He walked on.

Another heap of flesh was pitched before the front wall of the ranch-house. The man it had been a little while before had evidently been running for the door when the deadly rays had got him. His ray-gun was lying a few feet away. Again Carse stooped and again very gently pulled the ragged thing over.

"By God!" stammered Harkness suddenly, staring, his face white, "that—that's Jack O'Fallon—old Jack O'Fallon! Why, we went to navigation school together! We—"

"Yes," said the Hawk. "O'Fallon, overseer." He stepped into the house. Friday, impassive and grim, pulled Harkness away from the distorted body.

THREE more were tumbled together behind a splintered table in the main room. The rays had done their work well. Three were welded, it seemed, into one. . . . It was some time before the Hawk's frigid whisper came.

"Martin . . . Olafson . . . and this—Antil . . . Antil was the only Venusian I ever liked. . . ."

The chairs and tables in the room were overturned, most of them bore the seared scars of ray-guns, which showed plainly enough that there had been a desperate last minute hand-to-hand struggle there, after the defensive ray-web had failed and the pirates rushed the building. The radio alcove was choked with seared, cracked wreckage. Crane, the operator, still sat in his seat, but he was slumped over forward, and his head and chest were pitted with slanting ray holes. One hand had been reaching for a dial. The other was twisted and charred.

"And Crane, the last," said Hawk Carse, and for some moments he stood there, his face cold and unmoving save for the tiny twitching of the left eyelid. Utter silence rested over the bitter three—a silence broken only by the occasional roar of an angry phanti bull outside in the enclosure.

Finally Carse took a deep breath and turned to Friday.

"You'll see to their burying," he ordered quietly. "Get the power ray from the ship and burn out two big pits on that knoll off the corner of the corral."

Friday looked at him in puzzlement. "Two, suh?" he repeated. "Why two? Why not put 'em all in one?"

"You will put all my men in one. I'll need the other later. . . . You," he went on, to Harkness, "get the cargo of horns aboard. We can't leave it out there, for three of those pirates fled into the jungle. I haven't time to find them, and they'd come out and bury the horns if we left them. I'll be with you soon. We take off in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir," answered the navigator, and he and the negro went out.

FOR a little while Carse stayed in the cubby. As he softly stroked the flaxen bangs of hair over his brow, he visualized what had happened inside that house of death, piecing a number of things together and forming a whole. On the surface it seemed plain enough, and yet there were one or two points. . . . His face showed a trace of puzzlement. He shook his head slightly; then he stooped and picked up the radio operator's body with an ease that might have seemed surprising from such a slender man, and walked out of the house.

Beyond one corner of the corral, upon a slight rise in the ground,

Friday was melting out the second grave with the ship's great portable ray-gun. Carse laid Crane's body gently down in the first grave, then went to where Harkness, with the *Star Devil's* radio-man and cook, was loading the cargo of horns aboard. The trader opened several of the boxes, glanced at the upper layers to inspect the quality, and, satisfied, closed them again. All the boxes were trundled soon into the craft's open port and aft to her cargo hold.

The engineer on watch at the electelscope and visi-screen felt a hand on his shoulder and looked around to find his captain standing by him. He pointed up at the screen: on it, the brigand ship was a mere four inches in size, and bearing straight out on an unwavering course. "I reckoned their speed to be about ten thousand an hour, a minute ago, sir," he reported. "Now about five thousand miles away."

"How soon," Carse asked, "do you think we could overhaul them?"

The other grinned. "If you're in a hurry, sir, about two hours and a half."

"I am in a hurry. I want all the speed you can muster."

"Yes, sir. Might be able to get it down to two."

The Hawk nodded. "Try. Return to your post."

Outside, through the port, he saw Friday smoothing over the grave, the burying finished, and he beckoned him in. At that second Harkness reported the cargo all fastened down. Carse snapped out his orders.

"Harkness," he said shortly, "you and Friday with me in the control cabin. Sparks, you can get an hour's sleep, but leave the radio receiver open. Cook, an hour's rest if you want it—and I think you'd better want it. There's war ahead. Close port!"

The inner and outer doors nestled snugly, one after the other, into place with a hiss; the rows of gravity plates in the ship's belly angled ever so slightly. She quivered, then, in a surge of power, lifted straight up and poised; then, answering the touch of space-stick and accelerator, she went streaking through the atmosphere on the trail of the distant craft that had left its mark of blood on Iapetus and provoked the vengeance of the Hawk. . . .

CHAPTER III

Death Rides the Star Devil

USUALLY, when pursuing an enemy, Hawk Carse was impassive and grim, apparently emotionless, icy. But now he seemed somehow disturbed.

He fidgeted around, glancing occasionally at the visi-screen to make sure his quarry was not changing course, now watching Friday juggle through the skin of atmosphere into outer space, and now standing apart, silent and solitary, brooding.

There was something about the affair he didn't like. Something that was deeply hidden, that could not be grasped clearly; that might, on the other hand, be pure imagination. And yet, why—

Why, for instance, had the brigands taken to their heels with just the barest semblance of fight? Why, with their defensive ray-web proof for some time at least against his offensive rays, had they left without more of a struggle for the horn? Why were they so willing to flee, knowing as they must that he, the Hawk, would follow? Did they not know he had—thanks to Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow—the fastest ship in space, and would inevitably overtake them?

Were they Ku Sui's men? It seemed so, certainly. From the great

strength of their defensive ray-web. No other ships that he knew of in space save Ku Sui's possessed such power. But—it wasn't the brilliant Eurasian's customary style. It was too simple for him.

Carse stroked his bangs. The factors were all mixed up. He didn't like it.

Iapetus' atmosphere was left behind, in minutes the light blue wash of her sky changed to the hard, frigid blackness of lifeless space. The *Star Devil's* lighting tubes glowed softly, though Saturn's rays, coming through the wide bow windows, still lit every object in the control cabin with hard and dazzling brilliancy. Inside, light and color, life and action; outside, the eternal, sable void, sprinkled with its millions of sparkling motes of worlds. And ahead—shown now on the vise-screen only by the light dots of its ports—was the brigand craft.

The *Star Devil* was smoothly building up the speed that would eventualy bring her up to the craft of the enemy. Carse's Earth-watch told him that an hour and a half had passed. A vague anxiety oppressed him, but he shook it off with the thought that soon the time for accounting would arrive. Only forty minutes more; probably less. His fears—foolish. He was getting too suspicious. . . .

THEN came the voice.

It pierced through the control cabin from the loudspeaker cone above the radio switchboard. It was rough and mocking. It said:

"Hawk Carse? Hawk Carse? You hear me?" Many times it repeated this. "Yes? You hear me, Hawk Carse? I've a joke I want you to hear—a very funny joke. You'll enjoy it!" There interrupted the staccato sounds of an irrepressible amusement.

Carse froze. His fingers by habit fluttered over his ray-gun butt as he wheeled and looked into the loudspeaker. Friday, at the space-stick, stared at him; Harkness's face was puzzled as he peered at the loudspeaker and then turned and gazed at his captain.

"But where," he asked, "—where does the voice come from? Who is it?"

As if thinking aloud, Carse whispered:

"From that ship ahead. I half expected. . . . I know it well, that voice. Very well. It's the voice of . . . of . . . I can't quite place it. . . . In a minute. . . . The voice of—"

The chuckling ceased, and again the voice spoke.

"Yes—a very funny joke! I can't share it all with you, Carse, because you'd spoil it. But do you remember, some years ago, five men—and another who lay before them? Do you remember how this last man said: 'Each one of you will die for what you've done to me?' That man didn't wear bangs over his forehead then. Remember? Well, I'm one of the five the mighty Hawk Carse swore he would kill!"

Again the voice broke into a chuckle.

But it ended suddenly. The tone it changed into was entirely different, was cruel with a taunting sneer.

"Bah! The avenging Hawk! The mighty Hawk! Well, in minutes, you'll be dead. You'll be dead! The mighty Sparrow Carse will be dead!"

A brief eternity went by. Carse remembered, and the glint in his gray eyes grew colder.

"Judd the Kite," he whispered.

Friday's lips formed the words.

And even Harkness, new to the frontiers of space, knew the name and echoed it haltingly.

"Judd the Kite. . . ."

OF all the henchmen Dr. Ku Sui had gathered about him and banded against Earth, and against Carse, and against all peaceful traders and merchant-ships, Judd was perhaps the most cruel and relentless.

The Kite he was called—though only behind his back—yet it might better have been Vulture. Big and gross, with thick unstable lips and stubby, hairy fingers, more than once he and his motley gang of hi-jackers had painted a crimson splash across the far corners of the frontiers, and daubed it to the tortured groans of the crews of honest trading ships. Often they had plunged on isolated trading posts and left their factors wallowing in their life blood. And more. . . .

There are things that cannot be set down in print, that the carefully edited history books only hint at, and into this class fell many of the Kite's deeds. He was a master of the Venusian tortures. He and his band during the unspeakable debauches which always followed a successful raid would amuse themselves by practising certain of these tortures on the day's captives; and his victims, both men and women, would see and feel indescribable things, and Death would be kept most carefully away until the last ounce of life and pain had been squeezed quite dry.

"Judd the Kite." Carse repeated in a hardly audible whisper. "Judd the Kite . . . one of the five. . . ." Slowly his left hand rose and smoothed his long bangs of flaxen hair. "I have been looking for him."

"Will you reply to him, sir?" asked Harkness.

"What use? His trap—Ku Sui's trap, of course—has already been set." His brain raced. "What could it be?" he whispered slowly.

FRIDAY was scratching his woolly hair, his smooth face puzzled, when Carse, with the crisp decisiveness that always came to him when in action, looked up at the visi-screen. The brigand was still clinging to a straight course, and being overhauled rapidly. Another thirty minutes and they would be within striking distance. He said tersely:

"Set up the defensive web. Spiral and zig-zag the ship all you dare, altering the period of the swing each time. Harkness, you and I are going to make an inspection tour. General alarm if Judd's course changes, Friday."

"Yes, suh." The negro, frowning, gave his undivided attention to his instruments as the Hawk and Harkness went aft into the next compartment, the engine room.

It looked quite normal. The great dynamos were humming smoothly; the air-renewing machine was functioning steadily; the gauge hands all slept or quivered in their usual places. Nothing uneven in the slight vibration of the ship; nothing that might possibly forbode trouble. Up on his perch, the engineer peered down curiously and asked:

"Anything wrong, sir?"

"Not yet," Carse answered shortly. "You're sure everything is regular here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. But check every vital spot at once—and quickly. Then keep alert."

They passed on into the following compartment, the mess-room and sleeping quarters for the crew. Solid, rhythmical snores were issuing from the cook's open mouth as he lay sprawled out on his bunk; the smell of coffee hovered in the air; the cabin was quiet and comfortable with an atmosphere of sleep and rest. The radio-man, reading in his bunk, looked over

and, seeing it was Carse, sat up.

"Notice anything wrong?" he was asked.

"Wrong? What— Why, no, sir. You want me for duty?"

"Yes. Stay here and keep your eyes open for signs of trouble. I'm expecting some. General alarm if the slightest thing happens." And Carse went noiselessly into the last division of the ship.

This was the cargo hold. The boxes of phanti horns were neatly stacked in precise rows; the dim tube burning overhead showed nothing that gave the smallest cause for alarm. The Hawk's narrowed eyes swept walls, deck and ceiling in a search for signs of strain or buckling, but found none.

THEN he let himself down into the ship's belly, in the three-foot-high space between the deck and the bottom outer hull. He found the three rows of delicately adjusted gravity plates in good order. Harkness joined him.

Their hand-flashes scanned every inch of the narrow compartment as they made the under-deck passage from stern to bow and up through the forward trap-door into the control cabin. They found nothing abnormal. The water and fuel tanks, built in the space between the inner and outer shells above the living quarters, also yielded nothing; likewise the storeroom.

Nothing. Nothing at all. The whole ship was in excellent condition. Everything was working as it should. Carse went forward again with Harkness; turned and faced him with puzzled eyes.

"I can't understand it," he said. "Why that threat, when everything seems all right? How can Judd reach me to kill me? And in minutes?"

The navigator shook his head. "It's beyond me, sir."

The Hawk shrugged his shoulders. "Well, we'll see. It might be something altogether new. You report to the engine-room and keep on watch there. Any sound or sign, give the general alarm."

"Yes, sir," he said, and left.

"He talkin' foolish, that Judd," grumbled Friday, seeing that the search had been fruitless. "He think maybe he can bust through our ray-web? Hmff!"

His master said nothing. He was standing motionless in the center of the cabin, waiting—waiting for he knew not what.

Then it came.

A preparatory sputter from the loudspeaker that spun Friday around. Hawk looked up, tensed. Again sounded the hard, sneering voice of Judd the Kite.

"We're ready now, Carse: there was a little delay. I'll give you, say, five seconds. Yes—one for each of the five men you did *not* kill. Shall I count them off? All right. You have till the fifth.

"One."

Friday's big eyes rolled nervously; he wiped a drop of sweat from his brow and cursed.

"Two."

HE glanced at the Hawk, and tried himself to assume the unshakable steely calm of the great adventurer. But his fists would clench and unclench as he stared up at the visi-screen. No change! The brigand was running straight ahead as ever, apparently fleeing.

"Three."

The negro's breath came more quickly; the tendons of his neck stood sharply out, and his powerful arms twitched nervously. "What's he goin' to do, suh? What's he goin' to do?" he asked hoarsely. "What's he goin' to do?"

"Four."

"Change course — a-starboard!" Carse rapped. The space-stick

moved a little, all Friday dared, at their speed; the position dials swung; the dot of a fixed star that had been visible a moment before through the bow windows was now gone. Till the fifth, Judd had said.

"Five!"

The two men in the control cabin of the *Star Devil* peered at each other. One of them licked his lips and wiped the sweat from his brow. But there was nothing. No sound, no change. No general alarm bell. No offensive ray spearing across the reaches of space; no slightest change in the brigand's course. He who had mopped the sweat away laughed loud and long in overwhelming relief.

"All foolishment!" he gurgled. "That Judd, he crary. Try to scare us, I guess—huh! Try to—"

"*What's that?*" whispered Hawk Carse.

A sudden faint rustle of noise, of movement, had breathed through the ship.

At first it was hardly discernible; but it grew. It grew with paralyzing rapidity into a low but steady murmur, blended soon with voices raised in quick cries. There was one piercing, ragged shriek, and all the time an undertone of the indefinite, peculiar sound of something rustling, creeping, growing.

THEN came the harsh jangle of the general alarm bell.

"Space-suits!" Carse snapped. The alarm was the signal to put them on; it was a safeguard from a possible breach in the ship's walls. Against such an emergency they had drilled often, and all over the ship the crew would be springing rapidly into space-suits hanging ready.

The space-stick automatically locked as Friday, eyes rolling, leaped with his master to the nearby locker. The shriek from aft had quickly died, the alarm bell had snapped off, but now there came a frantic rush of feet, and a man tumbled through into the control cabin, his face white, his eyes stark with horror, his breath coming in gasps and the sweat of fear on his brow.

It was Harkness.

He slammed the door tight shut behind him and stumbled to the suit locker; and as his fingers fumbled at his suit with the clumsiness of panic, he stammered:

"The cargo—the boxes of horn—it came from aft! Fungus! Planted in the horn! It's filling the ship! Got all the others and grew—*grew* on them! Dead already. There—look, look!"

Carse and Friday, grotesque giants in the bulky sheathings of stiff, many-plied fabric, turned as one and peered through their quartzite face shields to where the navigator's bulging eyes directed them.

It was the door between control cabin and engine room—the door he had just slammed shut. At first nothing was visible; then they saw the van of the enemy that had swarmed through the ship.

A thin line of bright yellow color had appeared along the under crack of the door. A second later the door was rimmed on all sides with it. It grew; reached out. Energy flowed through it; fingers of dusty yellow pronged out from the cracks where the door fitted, hung wavering for a moment, melted together, then slumped to the floor to more quickly continue the advance. It increased marvelously, in minor jerks of speed. It was delicate in texture, mold-like. The more there became, the faster it grew; in seconds shreds of it had darted out from the main mass and affixed themselves to the walls and ceiling of the cabin, there to accelerate the horrible filling process.

ALL this happened more quickly than it can be related. Within ten seconds most of the cabin was coated by the yellow stuff; grotesquely formed clumps and feathers hung from the ceiling; fern-like fingers kept spurting everywhere. Friday stepped back before the advance, but not the Hawk. Useless to try and evade the stuff, he knew, and he was fairly positive that there was no immediate danger: the tough fabric of the suits should resist it. A pseudopod-like surge flicked to his leg, crept up; cloaked the suit in patches of yellow; thickened and enveloped him. But it could not pierce through.

"Cap'n Carse! Look heah!"

He turned to the alarmed voice, brushing light, feathery particles of yellow from his face shield, and found the bulky giant that was Friday a few steps behind him, and pointing mutely at Harkness.

The young officer was slumped limply down against a wall, his legs sprawled and body twisted unnaturally. His suit was covered with the yellow, and he had fallen, silently, while they were watching the advance of the fungus and checking the fastenings of their suits.

Carse reached him in three steps, stooped, brushed the fungus off the face-shield and peered through. Friday looked over his shoulder. The yellow enemy had laid its deadly fingers on Harkness's fine pale face. Sprouts of yellow trailed from the nostrils; the mouth was a clump of it; tendrils of spongy substance had climbed out the ears and were still threading rapidly over the head, even as the Hawk and Friday watched.

"That's how the others died," the adventurer said slowly. "Harkness must have carried a bit of the stuff from aft. It was on him when he put on his suit. At least I hope so. If it can get into these suits. . . ." He left the thought unfinished.

"You mean, suh," asked Friday haltingly, "you mean that maybe—maybe it'll get in our suits too?"

"Maybe," said Carse without emotion.

They waited.

CHAPTER IV

The Hawk Prepares a Surprise

HAWK CARSE'S icy poise in times of emotional stress never failed to amaze friends and enemies alike. Most of them swore he had no nerves, and that in that way he was not human. This estimate, of course, is foolish: Carse was perhaps too human, as was proved by the all-consuming object of his life. It was rather, probably, an inward vanity that made him stand composed as a statue while death was gnawing near; that had, once, led him actually to file his nails when apparently trapped and hotly besieged, with the wicked hiss of ray-guns all around.

And so he stood within his suit now—calm, quite collected, his face graven, while the yellow tendrils carpeted the whole cabin, penetrated between the twin banks of instruments on each side and clouded the bow windows, visi-screen and positionals until the two living men aboard that ship of death were completely shut off from outside vision. Friday, his large white eyes never for a moment still, and waiting as the Hawk was waiting to find whether or not their suits, too, harbored the fungus, could quite easily have been scared into a state of panic; but the sight of the steely figure near him eased his nerves and brought a vague kind of reassurance.

Minutes went by. Presently the Hawk said softly into his microphone:

"We're safe, now, I think. You'd better go aft and see what state the ship's in. Come right back." And as Friday left, wading through the clinging growth, the trader went to the eye-piece of the electelescope.

He brushed the puffy covering of yellow still away and adjusted the instrument's controls as best he could, centering it on where Judd's craft had last been. Then he peered through—and saw that which made him start.

The *Star Devil* was rolling round and round, like a ball!

CARSE looked out on a star-studded panorama that was sweeping crazily by. Now the cloudy globe of Iapetus, which had just before lain far behind, came swinging into view, sliding rapidly from the bottom of his field of view to the top, and so out of sight again, to quickly give place to the flaming ringed sphere of Saturn, which in turn passed away and left the star-spangled blackness of space. Then Iapetus once more. He snapped the electelescope off abruptly and turned from it to see Friday come clumping back.

"Swept everything clean, suh," the negro reported gloomily. "That fungus's thick; cain't even see the men's bodies, it's so deep. It's that way all over."

"It's down in the gravity propulsion plates, too," Carse said shortly. "Their adjustment's been ruined by it, and we're out of control, turning over and over. I couldn't possibly see Judd. Well, we've got to go down to the plates and try and clean them."

It was a weird scene that faced him in the engine room. The complex instruments and machinery were draped with straggling ferns of yellow; up above, a solid clump some ten feet thick hung on the platform where the engineer usually stood—a living torch. The usual purr of the mechanisms was muffled and hushed. So fecund was the fungus that the path Friday had cleared in his passage aft was already filled, and Carse had to clear a new one. The growth was deep there, but still deeper in the next compartment.

It was practically a solid mass of yellow, for in it their invader had found food. It had fed well on the lockers of supplies and devoured all but the bones and clothing of the two men whom it had caught—radio-operator and cook. Carse fought on through this tough, clinging sea and came at last to the cargo hold, where, in the deck, was the man-hole that gave passage down to the tween-decks compartment where the rows of gravity propulsion plates were located.

FRIDAY raised the cover with a wrench; then, preceded by the rays of their hand-flashes, they clumbed down and wormed forward, as best they could in their hampering suits, to the plates. They found they had lost their customary glitter beneath powdery coatings of yellow, sufficient to disturb their faint electric currents and microscopically adjusted angles. On hands and knees—for the compartment, though as wide as the ship's inner shell, was only three feet in height—the Hawk stopped and said:

"We might be able to get some use out of these plates if we can keep the fungus brushed off. It's thin; let's try it."

But the yellow growth's vitality baulked them. Sweating from their awkward exertions inside the hot space-suits, they again and again brushed clean the plates with pieces of waste—only to see the feathery particles regather as quickly as they were cleared away. There wasn't more than an inch of the

fungus, but that inch stuck. There was no removing it.

"No use, boss," gasped the negro, pausing breathless. "Cain't do it. Nothin' to do, I guess, but wait an' see what de Kite does. He'll sure want this ship and the horn."

"I know," his captain answered slowly. "He'll want this ship, for it's the fastest in space—but I can't understand how he'll board us. I'm going up and see what I can find out. You stay here. Try cleaning the plates again."

Up through the man-hole he went, and forward to the control cabin. And, as before, the electelscope's eye-piece held a surprise for him.

Somehow, the *Star Devil's* speed of wild tumbling had lessened. A moment later the reason appeared. As her bow dipped down and down, there slid across the field of view, about a mile away, the lighted ports of another ship; and from this other ship's nose there winked a spot of green, the beginning of a ray-stream which stabbed across the gulf to impinge on the *Star Devil's* bow. Carse could feel his craft steady as it struck. It was a gravital ray, with strong magnetic properties, which Judd was using to stop her turnings so he and his men could board!

AGAIN and again the beam flashed across the Hawk's field of view, and he knew it was raying its mark neatly each time her bow swung abeam, for soon she was hardly turning at all. Then Judd evidently was satisfied. The port-lights of his ship veered aside, drew to a position abreast of the other. The two cold gray eyes that watched saw the outer port-lock door of the pirate open, revealing six figures, clad in space-suits and connected by a rope, that stepped out, pushed, and came floating towards the *Star Devil*.

Swiftly Carse moved. For many reasons it was useless, he rapidly decided, to try and surprise them as they boarded; there was a better and surer way. And, as always, he attended to every little detail—details that to others might have seemed trivial—of this preferred way.

With quick, strong fingers he removed the fungus-choked body of Harkness from its space-suit, and threw the suit into a nearby locker. From another locker he selected a loop of yellow-encrusted rope. Holding this over one arm, he made his way back rapidly to the after man-hole, closed it carefully behind him and crept forward to the anxious negro who was still futilely dusting the plates. He told what he had seen, but nothing else.

Friday noted the rope, and he twisted his whole body to get a sight of Carse's gray eyes, through the face-shield.

"What we do, them, suh?" he asked. "Try an' surprise 'em?"

"Can't do that; we'd still be helpless, without a way to remove this fungus. They probably know how to do it, and we've got to give them a chance."

Puzzlement pricked the negro. "Then what you goin' to do with that rope?"

"You'll soon see," snapped Hawk Carse.

THEY waited.

It was hot and stuffy down in the belly of the ship, and also utterly black, for the trader had flicked off his hand-flash. Friday was unhappily possessed of an active curiosity, he wanted terribly to go on with his questions and ask Carse what his plan was; but he did not dare, for he knew very well from past experience that the Hawk was impatient of detailing his schemes in advance. So he sat in silence, and sweated, and stared gloomily into

the darkness, thinking uneasy thoughts.

True, he thought, Judd the Kite did not know that Carse and he were still alive; on the contrary, he was probably convinced that they were dead; but what good did that do? Surely it would have been better to have surprised the brigands when boarding, but Captain Carse was against that. And they were hopelessly outnumbered.

Friday remembered a tale told him once by a survivor of a trading ship Judd the Kite had destroyed. It wasn't a nice tale. The Kite, so the report ran, was diabolically ingenious with a long peeling knife, and could improvise with it for hours. Friday pursued the tack of thought, and then suddenly began to sweat in earnest. He recalled—horrible!—that Judd possessed a special dislike for colored gentlemen! . . .

"Oh, Lawd!" he groaned, unconsciously—to have a cold voice ring in his earphones.

"Quiet!" it snapped. "They're entering."

The negro threw a switch on his helmet so he could catch outside noises. His body tensed. From above, unmistakably, had come the hiss of the inner port-lock door opening. And again, moments later, the hiss echoed. Twice! The lock could hold three men at a time. That probably meant that all six had boarded. Friday turned in the darkness and peered at Carse.

The adventurer without warning flicked on his hand-flash. The beam fell on the parallel planes of the yellow-covered gravity plates. The negro, every nerve in him jumping from impatience and suspense, gazed at them, and suddenly straightened. The moldlike fungus which had prevented them from getting the ship into control was slowly melting away. It was dwindling into fine dust!

"Gas," came a soft whisper to him. "As I expected, Judd's cleaning it out with some sort of gas. But the plates won't work yet—not until they're polished bright." Unthinking, Friday raised his hand to his helmet fastenings. "Keep your face-shield shut!" he was ordered crisply. "The gas would be as fatal as the fungus."

SILENCE rested tensely over the two men, to be broken at last by the clump of feet proceeding aft on the deck above.

Carse switched off the light. His voice was but faintly audible.

"Coming down to clean off the dust. He'll have a flash. Hide behind the truss-work at your side, and when he gets here seize him by the neck. I'll be with you right away. I want no noise."

Friday saw a great light, and grinned in the confidence it brought him. Of course! That explained the rope. The plan was so simple it had escaped him. Already he felt cheerful. It was only mental worries, and never physical hazards, that unsettled him. He angled around the truss-work and shrank into as small a space as possible—which wasn't very small, as he still wore his bulky, clumsy suit.

The clump-clump of feet had died; now there came the sound of the man-hole aft being raised. A white beam pronged down into the darkness, felt around and flicked off. Boots clanged on the connecting ladder; reached the bottom. The light appeared again, lower now, and came slowly forward. Limned faintly against the reflected light was the outline of a crouching man's body.

He went to hands and knees and progressed carefully, his flash darting to left and right. Suddenly, in a certain light, the two who awaited his coming saw a swarthy, black-stubbled face in profile. He wore

no space-suit! That meant, Friday reflected, that the brigands had cleared the ship of the gas in some way. It meant that they could get out of their own suits.

But they could not possibly do so at the moment. They heard the nearby pirate's breathing, a harsh oath as he stubbed a toe. The negro tightened his giant arms and held himself ready, his eyes steady on the black outline which signified his quarry. Then the pirate was close enough.

It was over in seconds. Rounding the truss, Friday caught the man in the armored crook of his arm. A startled croak preluded the thump of two bodies on the hull; there was the tinkle of a falling hand-flash and a slight squirming which was quickly stopped by a belting punch.

THEN Carse was there in the darkness, looping his rope around the pirate's arms and legs—a difficult job when wearing a bulky space-suit in such cramped quarters. He used a bunch of waste for a gag and then hauled the captive to a girder farther forward and bound him sitting to it. By the time he had finished, Friday was out of his space-suit and asking:

"Shall I rub him out, suh? Best make sure of him."

"Never in cold blood," said the Hawk acidly. "You should know that well enough by now!

"Now, there should be five left above, and I think they'll send another down. We must get him, too. Get back where you were."

He took off his space-suit also; then, after minutes of silence, they heard voices upraised in argument coming from the control cabin. Once more came the sound of feet overhead; another flash bit down through the man-hole, and another man wriggled into the compartment. He was obviously uneasy and suspicious. He called:

"Jake! Hey, Jake! You there? Where the hell are you?"

Mumbling oaths, he advanced, his light ray weaving over every inch before him.

"What you doing, Jake? Where are you?"

Friday gathered his muscles, unhampered now by the restricting suit. But light must have been reflected by the round whites of his eyes, for the pirate suddenly stopped and called in sharp alarm:

"What's that? What's that there? You, Jake? Hey! I'll ray you—"

And that was all he said. Friday was too far away to reach him in time, but the Hawk was closer; he approached behind the brigand, crouched on silent cat's feet. Two powerful arms reached out and tightened in a strangle hold—and two minutes later the second man was bound and gagged.

Carse loosened his ray-gun in its holster.

"Now we attack," he whispered. "Four to two are fair odds, I think. You go aft and wait by the man-hole; wait till you hear me call. Don't be seen—wait. And when I call, come at once."

"Yes, suh. You goin' forward 'tween the hulls?"

A curt nod answered him.

"Then up through that—"

"Don't ask so many questions!" the Hawk rasped crisply.

They separated.

CHAPTER V

The Hawk and the Kite

IN the deck of the control cabin, between a bank of instruments and the starboard wall, was another man-hole that gave entrance from the 'tween hulls compartment to the cabin.

Only two men besides Carse knew of its existence. The adventurer for good reasons of his own had it built in; and so cunningly was

its cover fitted on that its outlines were not visible.

Beneath it, now, on the three-rung ladder that led up from the lower shell, Hawk Carse waited.

He could hear quite clearly the angry, snarling voice of Judd the Kite, haranguing his men.

"Kinker, you go down and see what's wrong. Just because Jake and Sako don't come back right away, you guys seem to think the ship's haunted! Haunted! By Betelgeuse! A sweet bunch of white-livered cowards I've got for a crew—"

"Ah, lay off!" growled a deep, sullen voice. "I ain't scared, but this looks fishy to me. Something's wrong down there 'tween the hulls—damn wrong, I tell you. We only found four skeletons, an' four ain't the full crew for a ship like this. There oughta to be a couple more somewhere. Carse, blast him! he's got nine lives. How do we know he was one of the four?"

Another spoke up, as Kinker evidently hesitated. "I say we all go down and investigate together."

"Stow it!" thundered Judd. "They didn't get their space-suits out, did they? Why, they hadn't a chance to escape—none of 'em. They were killed, every one, quick! And four's plenty to work this ship. Carse is dead, see, dead! This was one trick he didn't know—one time he couldn't worm out. He was clever, all right, but he couldn't quite stack up against me. I swore I'd get him and I did. He's dead!"

"Judd," said a low, clear voice.

THE Kite whirled around. He stared. The hand-flash he was holding dropped to the deck with a clang. His hands went limp, and his voice was suddenly weak and dazed.

"My God—Carse! Hawk Carse!"

"Yes," a whisper answered. "Hawk Carse. And not dead."

It was a scene that might have puzzled a newcomer to the frontiers of space. Certainly there seemed to be nothing menacing about the slender figure that stood by the now open man-hole, both arms hanging easily at his sides; the advantage, on the contrary, appeared to be all with the men whom he confronted. All but one was big, and each was fully armed with a brace of ray-guns and knives.

But, though there were four guns to one, they made no attempt to draw. For it was the Hawk they faced, the fastest, most accurate shot in all those millions of leagues of space, and in his two icy eyes was a menace that filled the control cabin with fine-drawn silence.

At last Judd the Kite opened his lips and wetted them.

"Where did you come from?" he stammered.

"No matter," came the answer from the thinly smiling mouth. "Friday!"

"Yes, suh!" boomed the big black's distant voice.

Judd's three men turned their heads and saw Carse's famous satellite step into the control cabin, a ray-gun in each capacious hand. He was all flashing white teeth, so wide was his grin.

"Well, well!" he chuckled. "Ain't this the pleasure! Certainly am pleased to meet old friends like this—yes, suh! Jus' drop in?"

But the Kite's head had not turned; he seemed not to hear Friday's words; his eyes were held fascinated by Carse's. The attention of everyone came back to the two leaders.

"Ku Sui is in back of this!" asked the Hawk.

Judd licked his lips again. He had to spar for time, to divert for a while the vengeance he knew possessed the other's mind, so that he might find some chance, some loop-hole

"That's right," he began eagerly. "It was Ku Sui. I had to do this, Carse! I hadn't any choice. He's got something on me: I had to go through with it. Had to!"

THE Hawk's eyes were glacial; the ghost of a smile hovered once more around the corners of his lips.

"Go on," he said. "What was that fungus?"

"I don't know. Ku Sui developed it in his laboratory. He just gave me a sealed cartridge of the spores with instructions to raid your ranch, as you saw, and plant them in a drilled-out phanti horn. There was a simple mechanism in the cartridge that allowed us to release the spores by a radio wave from our ship. When I wanted them to grow I simply—"

"I see. A clever scheme," Carse said. "Quite up to Ku Sui's standard. The idea of those three men running for the jungle when I came down on Iapetus was to insure my taking the horn cargo aboard, of course. The raid was only incidental to your scheme to get me. And Crane, the radio operator, was dead when I received that S.O.S. It was faked, to bring me quickly for your schedule."

Judd stared at him. "How in hell did you know that? Damn you, Carse, you're—"

"Where," interrupted the adventurer coldly, "is Ku Sui?"

The pirate's eyes shifted nervously. "I don't know," he muttered.

"Where," came the steady question again, "is Ku Sui?"

The other licked his lips. His fingers clenched, unclenched, gripped tight. "I don't know!" he protested. His eyes widened as he saw the Hawk's left hand stir slightly, and he started as he heard the whip-like word

"Talk!"

"Carse, I swear it! No one knows where he is. When he wants to see me personally, he comes out of darkness—out of empty space. I don't know whether it's done by invisibility or the fourth dimension, but one moment his ship's not there; the next it is. I don't know where his base is, and if he knew I'd told you what I have, he'd—"

"How do you arrange your meetings, then?"

"They're always in a different place. The next is in seven days. I don't remember the figures: they're in the log of my ship."

Carse nodded. "All *right*. I believe you. And now—there are a few accounts to be settled."

DURING the few minutes the Hawk had questioned Judd, the brigand crew in the cabin had stood silent, their breath bated, their eyes watching fascinated. But now they started, and shifted uneasily. They suspected what was coming. The inexorable, seemingly inhuman adventurer went on emotionlessly:

"Six of my men were killed on Iapetus, treacherously, without a chance. Four more were slaughtered by the fungus. That's ten. Back up to your men, Judd."

Judd knew all too well what that order portended. He could not move. His cunning eyes protruded with fear as they shifted down and riveted on the shabby holster that hung on Carse's left side. His breath came unevenly, in short, ragged gasps through parted lips.

"Back, Judd!"

The stinging, icy force of the voice jolted him back despite his will. One short retreating step after another he took, until at length he was standing with his three men against the side wall of the cabin, the dividing line between it and the engine room. Friday's guns were still covering the pirates.

"You goin' to shoot us down in

cold blood?" one of them asked hoarsely.

The Hawk surveyed the speaker until the man shivered. Beneath their coldness, his gray eyes were faintly contemptuous.

"No—I leave that for yellow-streaked hi-jacking rats such as you. I'm going to give you a chance, more than a chance. Friday," he called.

"Yes, suh?"

"Do you want to come in on this?"

Without the slightest hesitation the negro answered, grinning:

"Yes, suh!"

"I thought you would. Come here alongside me, then sheathe your guns."

Friday did so. He stood in position beside his master, just in front of the opening that led below. The four brigands were some fifteen feet away. The two groups faced each other squarely.

"Good," whispered Carse.

THEY stood there, four men to two deadly enemies; yet not one hand moved toward a ray-gun. Again, an outsider would have marveled why Judd, the numbers on his side, did not draw and fire; why he waited, why his face was pale, his eyes nervous. But he knew too well what the least sign of a draw on his part would entail; he preferred to wait, to receive the advantage of the cold vanity in Carse which demanded, in gun-play, that the odds of numbers be against him. Perhaps this time that vanity would lead the Hawk a little too far. Perhaps even yet a loop-hole for strategy might appear.

So the Kite waited but fear was strong within him.

"A little earlier," the Hawk's frigid voice went on, "there was some counting. To the number five. Remember, Judd? Well, since you managed so poorly before, perhaps you'll count again."

"You mean to count to five?"

"Yes. And on the fifth count, we draw and fire."

Judd's eyes narrowed, shifted, while thoughts clashed and meshed in his brain. Hawk Carse smiled icily.

"Is that clear?" he asked.

Judd said after a while:

"All right."

Friday noted one of the pirates, a brawny, black-browed giant almost as large as himself, and decided to go for him when the time came. He whispered this to Carse; then, keeping his gaze on the man, he stood ready.

"Begin. I'm waiting," reminded Hawk Carse.

THE Kite crouched, drew a deep breath—but before his lips could form the first count there was a quick, sharp stir of movement from the brigand to his right; Carse's left hand seemed to vanish; a hiss followed, a streak of wicked blue light. Friday grunted, not yet quite realizing what had happened; Judd gaped at Carse's lowering weapon, then turned his eyes to the right—and choked out an oath.

The brawny giant by his side was standing, but his face was creased and puzzled. One hand was at a holster; the other grasped a gun—unfired. Accurate to an inch, between his eyebrows there had appeared as if by magic a neatly seared, round hole.

His knees crumpled. His gun clanged to the deck. His head bowed; he bent; he pitched forward, sprawled face downward. Then he quivered and lay still. A burnt odor was in the air.

"I'm still waiting, Judd," came an ironic whisper.

"My God!" stammered one of the pirate chief's two remaining men. "He's a devil. Fast as light!"

Judd's eyes had returned to the Hawk, and they still showed some of his reaction of surprise to what had happened, when a peculiar thing occurred. For a split second his gaze shot past Carse, took in something, then switched back again. And when he had done so his face showed a faint but unmistakable feeling of relief.

This was old stuff to the Hawk, but he could not afford to take chances. Instantly he rapped:

"Look behind, Friday! Quick!"

The negro jerked his head around. He was to late. He had a glimpse of a man standing in the man-hole behind—a glimpse of a short steel bar that flashed to Carse's head in a vicious arc, and again to his own. He was rocked by pain as blackness came across his vision, and together, white man and black crumpled to the deck....

CHAPTER VI

Back to Iapetus

AN indefinite time later Carse awoke to a trip-hammer of pain thudding through his head. He groaned a little, and tried to turn over in an effort to ease it. He found he could not. Then his eyes opened and he blinked up.

He found himself lying on the deck of the control cabin, near the after wall, and bound hand and foot with tightly strapped rope. Over him, looking down, was Judd the Kite, hands on his hips, a gloating smile on his coarse lips, and in his eyes a look of taunting, exultant triumph. He drew back his foot and kicked the netted Hawk in the ribs. The trader made no sound; his pale face did not change, except to set a trifle more rigidly.

"Pretty easy the way my men got you, Carse," said Judd. "Seems to me you're just a damned fool with a big rep you don't deserve. You're too careless. You ought to know by now not to leave bound men in reach of high-powered cable. It cuts as good as an electric knife. Does your head hurt where you were hit?" Deliberately, still smiling, he rapped his foot brutally against Carse's head.

The trader said nothing. He glanced around, to get the situation clearly. Friday, he saw, was in the control cabin too, lying stretched out and bound as he was, but evidently still unconscious from the ugly, bloody welt on his head. One of Judd's men was at the ship's space-stick, another stood by her dials, occasionally glancing back at the prisoners and grinning; the two remaining pirates were apparently aft. The body of the one whom Carse had killed had been removed.

Through the port bow window, far out, he noticed a small spot, half black and half brilliant with the reflected light of Saturn: that would be the other space ship, the Kite's, on the same course as they. And ahead was the large-looming sphere of Iapetus. The pirate was returning, then, to the ranch, probably to pick up his three men, and perhaps to leave a small crew to work it.

"Yes, I'm afraid this is the end of the Sparrow Hawk!" Judd sneered the name and laughed harshly. "A lot of people will be glad to hear it. There'll be a big reward for me, too, from Ku Sun. Head still bad?" And again he swung his leg and drove its heavy shoe into his captive's head.

CARSE'S lips compressed till they were colorless. He looked steadily at Judd's eyes and asked:

"What are you going to do with Friday and me?"

"Well," grinned the pirate, "I can't tell you definitely, but it's sure to be interesting. It'd suit

me best if I could teach you a few little tricks with a peeling knife—the Venusians have some very neat ones, you know—and then perhaps burn you full of holes. Little holes, done with a mild needle-ray. But unfortunately I can't kill you personally, for Ku Sui will want to do that himself. You're worth a hell of a lot of money alive."

"I go to Ku Sui, then?"

"That's right. I'll hand you over when I have my rendezvous with him, seven days from now. Clever man, Ku Sui! Half Chinese, you know. He'll be tickled to get you alive."

A muscle in the Hawk's cheek quivered. Then he asked:

"And Friday?"

Judd laughed. "Oh, I don't much care; he's not worth anything. I'll throw him in with you for good measure, probably. How's the head?" Once more the foot swung.

Carse's gray eyes were as frigid as the snow caps of Mars. The left eyelid was twitching a little; otherwise his pale face was as if graven from stone.

"Judd," he whispered, so softly that his voice was almost inaudible, "I shall kill you very soon. I shall make it a point to. Very soon, Judd. . . ."

The Kite stared at the pallid gray eyes. His lips parted slightly. And then he remembered that his captive was bound, helpless. He spat.

"Bah!" he snarled. "Just your mid stuff, Carse. It's all over with you now. You'll be screaming to me to kill you when Ku Sui begins to touch you up!" He guffawed, again kicked the man at his feet, and turned away.

Hawk Carse watched him walk to the forward end of the cabin and, after a little while, he sighed. He could be patient. He was still alive; and he would stay alive, he felt. A chance would come—he did not know how or when; it perhaps would not be soon; it might not come until he had been delivered to Ku Sui, but it would arrive. And then. . . .

Then there would be a reckoning!

The deceptively mild gray eyes of the Hawk were veiled by their lids.

NIGHT had settled over the ranch by the time the *Star Devil* and Judd's accompanying ship were in the satellite's atmosphere. It was the rare, deep, moonless night of Iapetus, when the only light came from the far, cold, distant stars that hung faintly twinkling in the great void above. Occasionally, the tiny world was lit clearly at night by the rays of Saturn, reflected from one of the eight other satellites; and occasionally, too, there was no night, the central sun of the solar universe sending its distance-weakened shafts of fire to light one side of the globe while ringed Saturn gilded the other.

But this season was the one of dark, full-bodied nights, and it was into the hush of their blackness that the *Star Devil* and her attendant brigand ship glided.

Below, on the surface of the satellite, glowed the pin-prick of a camp-fire. When the ships were some fifteen thousand feet up, Judd's orders caused long light-rays to shaft out from the *Star Devil* and finger the ground. They rested on the ranch house and then passed on to douse with white the figures of three men standing by the fire. Through the electelscope the pirate chief saw them wave their arms in greeting.

Ten minutes later the two ships nestled down close together a hundred yards or more from the ranch clearing, and Judd said to his mate, standing next to him:

"We'll have a little celebration to-night. Break out a few cases of alkite and send three of the boys to the ranch's storeroom after meat for the cook to barbecue."

"What you goin' to do with them two?" the other asked.

"Carse and the nig? Keep them here in the control cabin; I'll detail a couple of men to guard them. I'm taking no chances; they must be in sight every minute. Carse is too damned dangerous." He peered back at the captives. The trader's eyes were shut; Friday still appeared unconscious from the brutal blow on his head. "Asleep. Well, they'd better sleep—while they have eyelids to close!" Judd said mockingly, and his mate laughed in appreciation of his wit.

But neither the Hawk or Friday was asleep. Nor was the negro unconscious. Carse had ascertained this some time before by cautious signals.

A little stir had come within him when he heard Judd say there would be a celebration, for a celebration, to these men, meant a debauch and relaxed discipline, and relaxed discipline meant—a chance. First, however, there were the tight bonds of rope; they were expertly tied, and strong. But the Hawk was not particularly concerned about them.

He had dismissed them as a problem after a few minutes of consideration, and his mind ran farther ahead, planning coldly, mechanically, the payment of his blood debts. . . .

ALL in all, Judd was to blame for what happened that night on Iapetus. He was an old hand and a capable one, and certainly he should have known that extraordinary measures had to be adopted when Hawk Carse became his prisoner. By rights, he should have killed Friday immediately, and steered straight for his rendezvous with Ku Sui, keeping his eye on Carse all the time. He would have had to loaf on his way to the rendezvous, of course, for it needed but five days to get there, and he had seven; and he would also have had to pick up his three marooned men later. But that was what he should have done.

Yet, when one regards the personal angles, it is necessary to divide Judd's responsibility for succeeding events. He felt like having a celebration, and certainly he and his men had earned one. He had captured the man who had stood, more than anyone else, in his and in Ku Sui's way for years; the man who had quashed any number of their outlaw schemes, and who had given more trouble to them than all the forces of law and order on Earth and the patrol ships in space. More, he had captured him alive, and that meant a much fatter reward from Ku Sui. He possessed the valuable cargo of phanti horn; he had taken a brand new ship, alone worth millions, besides being the fastest in space. Judd was naturally elated; he had two nights and a day to spare; he felt expansive, and ordered a celebration.

Such decisions—trivial when seen from the eminence of a hundred years—have directed the tide of history more than once.

There were thirteen men left of Judd's crew, including the three posted on Iapetus; these three and the six who manned the pirate's own craft came running to the *Star Devil* and piled into her open portlock. They milled around in the control cabin, shouting in high spirits, swearing, throwing clumsy jests at the two silent figures on the deck; and Judd joined with them. There was much loot to be split, and the Hawk was snared at last! Their chief stilled them for a moment and said:

"Well, I guess we deserve a little jamboree. I'm breaking out some alkite and meat; make a big fire outside and dig some barbecue pits. Go ahead—out of here! But wait, you, Sharkey, and you, Keyger."

These last two men, more husky and alert than most of their fellows, he detailed for guard duty over Carse and Friday. They were much cast down at the job, but he promised them a larger slice of the loot for recompense, and then stalked out after the other men.

The two guards stuck a brace of ray-guns in their belts and looked over the captives. Angry at missing the carousal, the man called Keyger kicked Friday, whose eyelids did not budge and whose body did not quiver, and then, more gingerly, kicked Carse and swore at him—but he turned somewhat hastily when the mild gray eyes slowly opened and stared up into his.

Then the two guards pulled out chairs and placed them by the open port-lock, where they could command a view of the celebration. They drew one ray-gun each, laid them ready, close by, and sat down.

CHAPTER VII

Jamboree

TWO hours later their eyes were taking in a fantastic, mad scene, one that in some ways might have occurred in the days when buccaneers roamed the Spanish Main of Earth.

A little over a hundred yards away, straight before them, was the corral of the phantis; far behind it encroached the shadowy fringe of the jungle; to their right, closer to the corral than to the space ships, was the ranch house, lonely now and silent. But these objects were only the background for what had grown in front of the corral wire.

It was the roaring mass of the monster fire that had been lit, a splash of fierce, leaping flames in the velvety cool of the night. Black shapes were clustered around it, bottles were raised and drained, and a frieze of shadows staggered and jumped and danced around the ruddy pile of fire. The carousal was in full swing; a chorus of wild song rose noisily into the night; more cases were smashed open and more alkite drawn out. The carcases of three animals taken from the ranch's storehouse sizzled on the barbecue pits, to be ripped apart and the rich, dripping meat torn at, tooth and claw. Ever higher pierced the shrieks and oaths, till the calm night was distorted and crazy.

Other heavier sounds accompanied the bedlam of human noise: deep snortings and roarings and the scraping of scores of horn-shod feet. Behind their wired electric fence was clustered the herd of phantis, staring with their evil, red-shot little eyes at the flames and the shapes of the hated men. The big bulls were bellowing, bucking their heads angrily, churning up the soft soil with their strong, dagger-spurred feet; the welter of noise and the sight of so many men had wrought them up into a vicious and dangerous state.

Judd the Kite, a bottle in one hand and in the other a huge joint of meat which he was tearing at with his teeth, suddenly paused with mouth crammed full and stared over through the flickering light at the phanti corral. A cruel light gleamed in his eyes; he gulped down the meat and then turned to the shapes staggering around him. He yelled:

"Hey, there—let's get out the nigger! A little entertainment, fellows! Bring him out; but don't touch Carse; he's Ku Sui's. Douse him with water if he's unconscious."

THEY yelled in drunken delight at his words, and half of them reeled off towards the *Star Devil*. Judd, lips upcurved in a smile, drew his ray-gun and set the lever over for the low-power, continuous ray-stream. These guns, unlike our present weapons, could shoot in two ways: they could spit about twenty high-power discharges, a fraction of a second each in duration and easily sufficient to burn a man's head through; or they could deliver a long-lasting low-power stream, just strong enough to sear and crisp a human skin. For the entertainment Judd had in mind he needed low power.

The men sent to the *Star Devil* shoved past the guards on watch near the port-lock and over to the prisoners. They found them lying very close together near the after wall.

"Gonna have some fun with the black. Judd's orders," they explained to the guards. "Still unconscious?"

Certainly Friday looked unconscious, his eyes closed, his full lips slightly parted, showing the powerful white teeth.

"I'll give him a shot of the ray," another brigand cut in. "That'll bring him to. Be ready to grab him."

They got an unpleasant shock when the low-power stream flicked the negro's leg. With a gigantic bellow that rang throughout the ship, Friday resisted.

It was like seeing a dead man come to life, and it startled them. Bound as he was, Friday made things unhealthy for his would-be captors; he shunted his legs up and down and squirmed mightily, and once his gleaming teeth snapped into an arm, bringing a howl of pain and several minutes of cursing. The unexpected resistance, once the surprise was over, infuriated the rum-sodden men. One of them yelled: "Sock him, Shorty!" A ray-gun's butt was slapped down on Friday's head; the negro rolled over, stunned. Then he was picked up without resistance and borne out into the night, where fantastic figures cavorted around the towering fire.

"The black devil was faking all the time!" one of the guards said amazedly. "He wasn't unconscious. What in hell did he do that for?"

"Dunno," snarled the other, rubbing a bruised leg. "Must have suspected what he's gonna get. Wish we was over there."

"Well, we can watch from here," grumbled his companion, and returned to the seats by the port-lock.

They both sat down, their backs half turned to the figure still lying on the deck.

CARSE had said nothing, made no protest, had not even moved when Friday struggled in fierce resistance. He could have done much more, but it would have been useless. Long before, he had seen the negro's opening eyes and signaled him to feign unconsciousness, thus deflecting attention and making him appear harmless. He had also broached his plan for escape to Friday. He had not, however, reckoned on Judd's desire to torture: he would, he now saw, have to act with his greatest speed to save his mate from as much pain as possible.

And he began to act.

The control cabin was streaked with patches of shadow and light, made vague by pools of darkness thrown by the banks of instruments. Only one lighting tube was dimly burning. In this indefinite half-light the Hawk set about stalking his prey.

With eyes narrowed and steady on the two guards who were completely absorbed in the happenings

outside, he drew his hands from beneath him. They were no longer bound. The rope knotted around them had been gnawed through strand by strand—sliced by the strong white teeth of a negro. . . .

Cautiously, without a whisper of sound, Carse reached towards the bonds on his legs. The lean fingers worked rapidly. Quickly the knots yielded and the rope was unwound. The legs were free. For a moment Hawk Carse, ever with careful calculation of time, stretched his cramped muscles, limbering them for action.

A mutter came from the portlock. He froze. But it was only:

"Look at 'im! This is goin' to be good! Judd gets some damn clever ideas!"

They were utterly wrapped up in the scene outside, and unconscious of the low blot that moved with steely purpose behind them.

THE Hawk got to hands and knees; moved forward, the ghost of a shadow. The two men who were his quarry were sitting close together, hunched a little forward in their eagerness not to miss a single detail. Their heads were not a foot apart. Each wore a ray-gun and had another lying on the deck at his side.

Carse came near to their backs. He paused, imperceptibly tensed, judged the distance carefully. Then in a sudden, snake-like movement, he sprang.

A forearm of steel clamped around the back of each guard's head and jerked it sharply into the other's. There was a quick crack; then, dazed, only half-conscious, the two men toppled off their seats and fell to the deck.

"Quiet!" warned an icy whisper. They stared, gaping, then staggered up to their feet.

A ray-gun that just before had been lying on the deck was leveled steadily at them, held in the hand of a gray-eyed man whose fine features were as if graven from stone and on whose wrists were deep blue lines that showed where ropes had pressed. The guards' faces whitened as realization came. One of them choked:

"It's him!"

"Yes," whispered the Hawk dryly. He took a few steps backward, eyes not moving. "Go to that locker," he said to the shorter of the men, indicating with a curt nod the place where space suits were stowed. "First draw your gun and lay it on that table. Hurry!"

The man hastily complied. Anything else was unthinkable; meant quick and lonely and useless death. Shouts and laughter and drunken shrieks were echoing from outside. No one would have ears for him.

When he had stepped into the locker, Carse closed and sealed the door.

"What you goin' to do with me?" croaked the remaining guard. He was big and burly and he towered inches over the figure facing him, but his lips were trembling and his eyes wild with fear.

"You," whispered the Hawk frigidly, "kicked me when I was bound." He sheathed his ray-gun in his holster, then spoke again. "Go for your gun."

The pirate trembled all over. His mouth fell open, and his eyes stuck on Carse's shabby holster. He seemed half hypnotized.

"Draw."

The other's swarthy brow beaded with sudden-starting sweat. His hands hung limp, twitching at the finger-tips. He watched death stare him in the face.

"Damn you, Carse!" he burst out, and suddenly went for his ray.

CARSE deliberately let him get the gun out. Not until then did his left hand move. But even

with such a head-start, so bewildering was the adventurer's speed that only one streak of orange light made a flash in the cabin, and that streak was the Hawk's. The brigand quivered, his face still contorted with his last desperate emotion; then he fell slowly forward and thudded into the deck. His body twitched a little, and in a spasm rolled over. Square between the eyes was a crisp, smooth-burned hole.

Hawk Carse gave the body not a glance, but sheathed his ray-gun, picked up the three others, stuck them in his belt, and glided to the port-lock. There, he peered outside.

His face hardened.

Blobs of flame that flared from wood torches were clustered about the nearest side of the phanti corral. A dark blur of figures were ringed in a half-circle, and from it came yells of delight and almost hysterical laughter. The Hawk's eyes were chilling to look at when he saw, through gaps in the circle of black shapes, the figure of a huge negro, standing with his back almost touching the wire fence of the corral. The actions of Friday gave the clue to what was happening.

He was caught in a broad ray of orange light, and in it he shuddered and hopped grotesquely from one leg to the other in an agony of pain, his lips drawn back taut over the gleaming teeth, his face flexed and the whites of his eyes showing as the eyeballs rolled. The glow that in part hung around him streamed from a ray-gun that was held in the right hand of Judd the Kite. Heat! Friday was being slowly crisped alive; seared on his feet in a furnace of heat; and the men who ringed him were yelling advice at him between their laughter. Carse strained his ears. In a jumble, he caught:

"Jump over"—"Nah, he'd have to climb"—"Climb! The juice's cut!"—"Into the corral!"—"Climb over, you black buzzard"—"Hoowee!"

ABOUT a foot behind Friday was the wire fence, behind which the phantis, their snouts converged towards the pirates, their red-shot eyes glaring, their powerful hind feet clawing at the ground, were bellowing in wild and ferocious excitement. Sudden, awful death waited on the other side of the fence; slow death by burning on this side. Yet Friday still hoped, still had faith in his master, for he did not put a quick end to his living death by rushing the devilish circle or clambering over into the thick of the sharp stabbing spurs.

Carse's brain moved with the swiftness of light. He could not rush the group: the odds were too great, and besides, Judd's gun was already out. Nor could he dive at them with the *Star Devil* itself, or ray them from above: that would mean Friday's death too. It would have to be something else—and in a moment he had it. Carefully he examined all variations and checked the scheme back: it promised to be the final move, engendering the final meeting, and there must be no slip.

First, the Hawk slipped shadow-like to the entrance port of the other space ship, lying a few hundred feet away, shrouded in darkness. He had to know if anyone were aboard.

Gruffly he called inside:

"Judd! Hey, Judd! You there?"

There was no answer. Again he called, but the gloomy interior's silence was not broken. Satisfied that it was empty, he doubled back with noiseless speed, skirted round the *Star Devil* and arrived like a wind-carried wraith at the rear wall of the ranch house.

A short leap and his hands closed

on the copper drain. The muscles of his wiry arms flexed, and the lean figure raised himself foot by foot to the eaves, where a pull and press up brought him over the edge. Stooping, he padded to the side which faced on the clearing and the corral.

And then the ray-gun was drawn from its holster.

For seconds the cold gray eyes reckoned the shooting distance and the angle. The weapon came up and rested at arm's length. The first finger of the deadly left hand began to squeeze back.

A pencil-thin streak of orange light speared the air!

CHAPTER VIII

Stampede

JUDD the Kite was enjoying himself hugely. His bestial sense of humor was tickled. It was very funny, the contortions of the negro in the orange ray-stream!

"Climb over!" he suggested, amid roars of laughter from the circle of men. "Climb over, why don't you? I've turned off the current. There's no electricity in the fence. You won't be hurt. Why don't you climb over?"

Friday did not, could not, answer. His lips were sucked tight together now in wordless agony; the cheek muscles, strained taut, stood out like welts of flesh; the huge body, bathed always in that steady glow of orange, was slightly livid in patches. He hopped mechanically, changing from one aching leg to the other; his eyes were closed half the time, his whole being one dumb agony. He did not know when it would end, but he still had faith.

Overhead, the flames of four tarred wood torches bobbed and reeled as the men who held them reeled; seemed to shake in the gusts of laughter and yells and oaths that came ceaselessly from the onlookers. And in this distorted light the half-shadowed snouts and bodies of the phantis, clustered behind their nine-foot-high fence, looked indeed diabolical. The fence was high, for the creatures possessed surprising jumping powers; it was composed of eight strands of wire, running parallel a foot apart from each other, with intercrossing supports. The electric current, now turned off, always kept the phantis from crashing through.

Judd smiled more widely. "I guess I'll increase the power," his coarse lips pronounced. "We'll see how you can duck a strong thin beam. I'll give you about five minutes to climb over. After that you'll be burned down slowly to a cinder. Now—will you climb? See—I'm moving the lever over. Watch, now, and feel—"

SUDDENLY his voice broke off short. There had been a hiss—a *spang*—a slight whip of sound. He glanced around swiftly. No, his men had not noticed it. They were still laughing, roaring, swaying in drunken merriment. The Kite's lips curved upward again. He continued:

"Feel the heat increase. It's stronger, now, and—"

Again the *spang*, the whip, the streak of something swift. The men noticed his expression and quieted somewhat. Judd was looking around him, and even as he saw what it was there came a cry from a pirate nearby.

"Look! The fence!"

Judd's eyes widened; his lips slackened and lost their smile. The noise, the laughs, the shouts, screams and oaths died into the night; frightened silence fell over the group, and all that was left were the concerted bellowings and snortings from the enraged herd of beasts just beyond.

All—except for another *spang* that sounded as a streak of orange light arrowed from somewhere through the flickering torchlight. And with its coming the third parallel strand of the corral-fence whipped apart with a little singing swish, shot neatly through, as were the two below it. Ten feet of fence on each side slumped visibly.

"Someone's shooting it through!" came a scared whisper. Yet still the brigands, held fascinated by fear and puzzlement, stared at the fence and at the surging crowd of stampede-crazy animals beyond.

Another *spang*, another streak of light! With deadly accuracy the shot clove the fourth strand. The lower half of a whole section of fence was gone. Behind it the bucking, red-eyed phantis inched forward, still afraid of the electric shock they thought was somewhere there, but drawn to the opening by their hatred of the two-legged creatures so near. Closer, closer! Then the befuddled pirates found their senses. Even as the fifth arrow of light came from the invisible marksman and snapped the fifth strand, a concerted cry of fear of the advancing beasts went up from the crowd of men.

"Run! Run! They're coming! They're coming out!"

They turned, panic-stricken; the torches fell flaring to the ground, to lie there in pools of flame; the brigands ran for the nearest shelter, the dark bulk of the ranch house close by. They ran, fear tingling their spines, in their ears the sound of the maddened phantis.

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FROM his vantage point on the roof of the ranch house, the Hawk confirmed his quick decision that this was the only way.

Rapidly, as was his custom, he had reckoned the problem out minutely and carefully; had considered and checked every possibility. He had to shoot the fence, not the brigands. For he couldn't hope to get more than a couple of them: a pirate toppling over dead would jar the others into instant action; they would scatter in the darkness, leaving the odds too great. And leaving, besides, small chance of wiping out every one of the pirates.

As for Friday, he had to take his chance. There was, this way, a good chance, if he used his brain. For, to the left, as close as the ranch house to the corral, were the grave-pits he himself had dug some hours before, and one was still empty, waiting to be filled. It offered shelter, a good chance—if he used his brain. He, Carse, would do all he could to protect him from the stampeding beasts while he ran.

Some of the pirates would be snared by the rush of phantis. Four or five would probably reach the ranch house. That was what he wanted.

And that was what he got. His fifth shot fired, straight and true from the ray-gun of the most accurate marksman of space, the Hawk lowered the weapon and gazed at the scene resulting, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

He saw the mob of creatures, in a bedlam of noise, sweep under the fence that had for so long kept them back. Bellowing their hatred, their cruel spurs eager for blood, they charged. Before them fled the thin fringe of men, Friday on one flank. A man went down with a scream; a half-grown horn knifed into him; he was trampled, gored, spurred, and left a bloody welter of death in seconds. Another, hearing the loud thud of feet just behind, turned with desperate eyes, dodged, tripped, shrieked and was caught and ripped. Another and another. In the dancing, flickering half-light of the flames of fire and torches, a hellish scene of devastation and death spun out.

CARSE was shooting again, with the cold, mechanical precision of a machine. There was Friday to be guarded. He was now separated from the other men—cut off and edging to one side—to the side where was the grave-pit! Dodging, wildly twisting and turning, he several times barely escaped three or four phantis that thundered after him. The leader took perhaps ten steps; then its body quivered and it tumbled over and flopped on the ground, a little wisp of smoke curling from its body. The other two went down in swift succession. But there were many, and even as Friday melted into the shadows, a group of several beasts detached themselves and roared after him. The deadly ray-gun on the roof wrought swift slaughter amongst them, but some got into the darkness beyond vision of the icy gray eyes.

Carse lowered his weapon. His face was very hard and very set. Would they catch the negro? Tumble down on him, if he made the pit? Well, there was no helping it. . . .

But the reckoning would soon be finished; the time was at hand. Cold as the deeps of space despite the awful havoc he had just created totally without visible emotion, he drew the last unused ray-gun from his belt and put it in the shabby holster. One would be enough.

Shadow-like, noiseless and swift, he moved towards the far end of the roof.

CHAPTER IX

The Hawk Strikes

HIS face red, his breath coming in hoarse gasps, Judd the Kite stumbled through the house's door on the heels of four of his men. He swung rapidly and flung his weight against the door, locked and double-locked it. A second later fists pounded on the outer panel, and a voice, racked with fear and terror, screamed:

"Let me in! Let me in! Oh, God, let me in! Judd!"

Then there was the thud of drumming feet, and one awful shriek from the man who had found the door locked against him.

But the Kite was not listening. A measure of courage returning to him with the building's protection, he snapped:

"Get those other doors locked quick! And lights. Then search the house."

The lighting tubes glowed, filling the room with soft radiance. Judd survey his position.

He saw that it could have been far worse. But his men needed courage.

The rapid change from orgy to deadly peril had sobered them completely. And they were frightened; nor was it fear of the beasts. They came treading silently back from their inspection of the house, reporting it empty; but their eyes kept shifting, their ray-guns ready in hand. Each one knew, deep within him, who had fired the shots that collapsed the fence. They had taken two captives; Friday had been under their eyes; there was only one other, and he was—the Hawk.

Hawk Carse! The four men were nervous. More than a few lonely spots in the countless leagues of space had seen his vengeance, and they—they had killed his guards and his overseer, his radio-man, and with the fungus his ship's crew; they had tortured Friday. They were now marks for the fatal left hand; fugitives from gray, icy eyes. The Hawk was loose!

JUDD saw the fear gnawing at their vitals. He felt it too. But there seemed no immediate danger.

with a ray-gun in each hand, he summoned a blustering courage and said to the others, harshly:

"Yes, it was that damned Carse! He must have got loose in some way. But pull yourselves together: we're safe here. He's somewhere outside."

He reasoned it out for them.

"He couldn't have done that shooting from the *Star Devil*, it's too far away. And he's not in it now or he'd be using it to try and find that black of his—if the black's still alive. No, he's not in the ship, and he's not in this house. He's somewhere outside, and he can't reach us here while the phantis have the place surrounded. We can shoot them down from the attic, and they'll soon beat it for the jungle. When that happens we'll rush to the ships, and before Carse knows what it's all about we'll be up and away and he'll be marooned. Then we'll get him later."

His words brought a return of confidence. It was true, the others thought: the Hawk could not reach them as long as the phantis were around the house; and when they were driven away, the ships were near at hand and empty. All they had to do was get to the ships before Carse. The adventurer certainly was not then in one of the craft, or he would be wasting no time hunting for Friday—and raying their stronghold. No doubt he was up a tree somewhere, perhaps gored and dead.

One of the men snickered, and Judd smiled at the sound. Their confidence in him was encouraging.

"Get to the windows of the attic," he ordered. "Some of those crazy brutes are horning at the house. We've got to shoot them and get out of here, quick!"

THERE were two rooms in the attic; the large one, used as a storeroom for staple foods, had five windows, long, sloping affairs, three in front and one in each side wall. The second room was small and at the rear, and was used to store tools and spare technical apparatus. It had one little window, set high up, and connected with the larger room by a door set in the middle of the partition.

Judd placed one of his pirates at each of the windows of the large room, taking himself the center one.

Around the house milled dozens of animal bodies, snorting, bellowing and roaring, their little red eyes flashing, claws tearing the soil in futile rage at the men they knew to be safely within. A babel of brutish sounds rose from them. Two of the bulls fell foul of each other and fought in fury, to suddenly turn and hurl their weight against a ground floor door, quivering it. But their rashness was answered by a streak of light from an attic window, and as one toppled back, its body burnt through, the sights of the destroying ray-gun were already on its fellow.

The huge fire the brigands had laid was dying, and night was seeping ever thickening darkness over the scene. Glinting very slightly in the starlight were the black shapes of the two silent space ships.

Then Judd the Kite, as he aimed and shot and aimed and shot again, was suddenly struck by a disturbing idea. From where had Carse fired at the corral fence? What was the logical vantage point for him?

A shiver trembled down his spine. He saw suddenly with terrible clearness where that vantage point was—and it had not been searched. The roof!

He turned swiftly, his lips opening to give orders.

And there, standing on the threshold of the door to the smaller adjoining room, stood the figure of a man whose eyes were cold with

the absolute cold of space, and whose left hand held a steady-leveled ray-gun that pointed as straight as his eyes at Judd!

"Hawk—Carse!"

"Judd," said the quiet, icy voice.

THE Kite went white as a sheet. His men turned slowly as one. One of them gasped at what he saw, another cursed, the other two simply stared with fear-flooded eyes; only one thing flamed in every mind—the never-failing vengeance of the Hawk.

"Carse!" repeated Judd stupidly. "You—again!"

"Yes," whispered the trader. "And for the last time. We settle now. There are a few debts—a few lives—a few blows and kicks—and a matter of some torture to be paid for. The accounts must be squared, Judd."

And slowly he raised his right hand to the queer bangs of flaxen hair which hung down over his forehead. He stroked them gently. Judd's eyes, dry, hot, held fascinated on the hand. He shuddered.

"It's not pleasant," came the whisper, "to always have to wear my hair like this. That's another debt—the largest of all—I have to settle. *Shootle your guns!*"

The voice cracked like a whip. They obeyed without sound, though they read death in the frigid gray eyes. At their guns went into motion. Carse followed suit, he stood there with both hands hanging at his sides. And he said in the whisper that carried more weight in them than the triggers of a gun:

"Once before we were interrupted. This time we won't be. This time we will see certainly for whom the number five brings death. Count, Judd."

With a jerk the Kite regained some control over himself. The odds were five to one. Five guns to one gun. Carse was a great shot, but such odds were surely too great. Perhaps—perhaps there might be a chance. He said in a strained voice to his men:

"Shoot when I reach five."

Then he swallowed and counted:

"One."

Aside from the tiny flickering of the left eyelid, the Hawk was graven, motionless, apparently without feeling. Judd, he knew, was just fairly fast, as for the others—

"Two."

—they were unknown quantities, except for one, the man called Jake. He had the reputation of possessing a lightning draw; his eyes were narrowed, his hands steady, and the body crouched, a sure sign of—

"Three."

—a gunman who knew his business, who was fast. His hip holsters were not really worn on the hips, but in front, very close together; that meant—

"Four."

—that he would probably draw both guns. So Judd must wait; the other three, being unknowns, disposed of in the order in which they were standing; but Jake must be—

"Five!"

—first!

ONE second there was nothing, the next wicked pencils of orange light were snaking across the attic. And then two guns clanged on the floor, unfired, and the man called Jake staggered forward, crumpled and fell, a puzzled look on his face and accurately between his eyes a little round neat hole that had come as if by magic. Two others, similarly stricken, toppled down, their fingers still tensed on ray-gun triggers; the fourth pirate, his heart drilled, went back from the force of it and crashed into the wall.

slithering down slowly into a limp heap. But Judd the Kite was still on his feet.

His lips were twisted in a snarl; his hands seemed locked. His eyes met the two cold gray ones across the room—and then his coarse face contorted, and he croaked:

"Damn you, Carse! Damn you—"

His body spun around and flattened out on the floor with arms and legs flung wide. A tiny black hole was visible through his shirt. He had been last, and the Hawk had struck him less accurately than his fellows.

The trader was unwounded. He stood there for several minutes, surveying what lay before him. He looked at each body in turn, and his eyes were calm and clear and mild, his face devoid of expression. Silence hung over the attic, for the bellowings and snortings of the beasts outside had died into faint murmurings as they straggled off for their jungle home. The single living man of the six who had lived and breathed there minutes before holstered his still warm ray-gun; and then the sound of a step on the stairs leading from the rooms below made him look up.

A man stood in the doorway of the attic.

HE was big and brawny; but, though his arms and bare torso were streaked with blood, and his trousers torn into shreds, and his legs crisscrossed with cuts, there was a broad grin on his face—a grin that widened as his rolling white eyes took in what lay on the attic floor.

Neither said anything for a moment. Then the Hawk smiled, and there was all friendliness and affection in his face.

"You made the pit, Eclipse?" he asked, softly.

Friday nodded, and chuckled. "Yes, suh! But only just! If Ah'd been a leap an' a skip slower Ah'd been a *ree-total* eclipse!"

Dancing lights of laughter came to the Hawk's eyes.

"Still feeling chipper," he said, "—in spite of your burns. Well, good for you. But I guess you've had enough of Ku Sui for a little while!"

The negro grunted indignantly. "You surely don' imply Ah'm *scar'ed* of that yellow Chink? Hell, no! Why—"

Carse chuckled and cut him off. "I see. Well, then, drag these carrion out to your pit. And then—"

There was something in the air, something big. Friday listened eagerly. "Yes, suh?" he reminded his master after a pause.

"Judd," said Hawk Carse softly, "was to have had a rendezvous with Dr. Ku Sui in seven days. The place of the rendezvous is entered in the log of his ship. I've got the last of Judd's crew a captive on the *Star Devil*. . . ."

The adventurer paused a moment in thought, and when he resumed his words came clipped and decisive.

"I myself am going to keep that rendezvous with Ku Sui. I want to see him very badly."

Friday looked at the man's gray eyes, his icy graven face, the bangs of flaxen hair which obscured his forehead. He understood.

Have You Tried
STRANGE TALES?



The body went twisting and turning into the gulf below.

Raiders Invisible

By D. W. Hall

THE muffled, helmeted figure of a pilot climbed down the spider ladder, nestled into the foremost scout's cockpit and pressed the starting button. The motor spat out a wisp of smoke, then burst into its full-throated roar, the automatic clamp above loosened, the scout dropped plummet-like, bobbed to the flagship below, straightened out, and zoomed [illegible] at thousand feet [illegible] the morning blue where it hovered for a few moments like an eagle or giant wings. Lieutenant Christopher Travers, the pilot, glanced around.

Behind and below him was spread a magnificent panorama. Against the pale of scintillating glass that was the sea moved rows of toy ships, topped by the gleaming, one-fifth-mile long shape of a dirigible of whose three scout planes Chris's was the leader. As he watched, the second scout dropped from the plane rack beneath the dirigible's sleek underside and went streaking away, followed by the third, in response to the Admiral's order of: "Proceed ahead to locate the enemy's position."

A grin relaxed Chris Travers' tanned, boyish face. His narrowed gray eyes swept the horizon. Below it somewhere lay hidden the ranks of the Black Fleet, complete with its own destroyers, submarines, cruisers, battleships, aircraft carriers and the ZX-2, sister dirigible of the Blue Fleet's ZX-1. Chris spurted the scout ahead and murmured:

"This war game's goin' to be a big affair—the biggest yet!"

It was. The Atlantic Fleet of the United States Navy, termed "Blue" for convenience, had been assigned to guard the Panama Canal; the Pa-

Alone and wounded, Pilot Travers hopes with the invisible foes who have struck down America's great engine of war



cific Fleet, "Black," to attack it. The cream of America's sea forces had been assembled for that week of March, 1935, all the way from crabby little destroyers to the two newly completed monarchs of the air, the twin dirigibles, fresh from the hangars at Akron, a thousand feet each in length and loaded with the latest offensive and defensive devices developed by Government laboratories.

The war game around the Canal was planned for more than practice, however. The eyes of the whole world were on that array of America's ocean might—the eyes of one foreign nation in particular. Washington knew of the policies of that nation, and wished to impress upon it the hopelessness of them. More than a game, this concentration of sea- and air-borne fighting power was a gesture for the continued peace of the world—a gesture strong with the hint of steel.

Chris Travers was vaguely aware,

through the rumors of the mess-room, of the double meaning of the game he was playing his part in, but this morning he didn't give a single thought. He was too wrapped up in his job of spotting the van of the Black Fleet, radio-telephoning latitude and longitude to the bridge of the Blue Fleet flagship, and getting home to his dirigible without being declared destroyed by one of the war game umpires.

Therefore, half an hour later, his heart thrilled as he glimpsed, wraith-like on the steely horizon, a wisp of smoke.

HE catapulted forward, eyes steady on that hint of ships. The smoke grew to a cloud of black pouring from the funnels of a V-shaped squad of destroyers, rolling through the lazy swells of the Pacific waters. Behind them came the battleships, larger warships, hazy blurs in the distance.

Chris struck fist in palm to the tune of a gleeful chortle. He was first! He hauled the microphone from its cubby in the dashboard and spoke the code words. Latitude, longitude and steaming direction of the Black Fleet he gave rapidly, and the information knifed back to the bridge of the Blue Fleet flagship, a hundred miles behind, where a white-haired admiral said: "Ah! Good boy! Get those bombers up—pronto!"

Chris commanded a superb view of the ZX-2, whose gleaming shape, showering rays of sunlight, hung like a thing in a painting over the Black Fleet. He stared at the far-off dirigible, lost in admiration of her trim lines, pausing a minute before returning to his own ZX-1. At that distance, the mammoth craft seemed no more than four inches long, yet, through his telescopic sight, he could discern her markings, machine-gun batteries and the airplane rack along her belly plainly. One plane, he saw, was suspended from the rack, the others were scouting for the Blue Fleet, even as he had scouted for the Black. He wondered if something were wrong with the plane left behind. Somehow, it did not look quite familiar.

But, even as he watched, it dropped from the automatic rack, then straightened and soared dizzily up. And, from one of the airplane carriers' broad decks, he saw two pursuit craft begin to rise. He grinned. They'd seen him, were coming after him!

He gripped the stick, prepared to swerve around. He had already raised a spread-fingered hand for a derisive parting gesture, when suddenly he stiffened. The hand dropped as if paralyzed.

"Good Lord!" he gasped. "What—"

The mighty thousand-foot dirigible ZX-2, pride of the Navy and all America, had wobbled drunkenly in her path. She stuck her nose down, and then her whole vast frame shivered like a wind-whipped leaf as the dull roar of an explosion rolled over the sea. A huge sliver of hide was stripped from her as if by magic, revealing the skeleton of girders inside—revealing a tongue of crimson that licked out and welled into a hell of flame.

Chris's blood froze. He watched the ZX-2 wallow in her death throes, writhe in the fiery doom that had struck her in seconds, that was devouring her with awful rapidity while thousands of men, blanched and trembling, gazed on helplessly. He saw her plunge, a blazing inferno, into the sea beneath.

There were old pals on her—buddies, gone in a flash of time!

This wasn't a war game. This was tragedy, stark before his eyes.

THE Black Fleet forgot its mimic battle. Radio telephone messages winged over the horizon to the approaching Blue Fleet. The

Black dreadnaughts hove to; launches with ashen-faced men in white manning them dropped overboard; a dozen destroyers rolled in the swells around a crumbled, charred egg-shell that but minutes before had been an omnipotent giant of the sky.

Chris Travers, aloft in sunlight suddenly bereft of its beauty, jammed the stick of the scout full over. He could do nothing, he knew. He could only return to the ZX-1 and tell the story of its sister as he had seen it.

But why, he wondered as he flew almost blindly, had the ZX-2 so quickly flamed to oblivion? The helium of its inner bags had been unin flammable, as had the heavy oil of its fuel tanks; the ten engines were Diesels, and hence without the ordinary ignition system and gasoline. Safety devices by the score had been installed on board; nothing had been overlooked. And the weather, perfect.

It was uncanny. It seemed totally unexplainable.

Swarms of planes droned between sea and sky, all speeding in the one direction, west, to where the crumpled remnants of a dirigible were slipping quickly beneath the billows, beyond the sight of man. Planes of war-game umpires, of officials, of newspaper correspondents and photographers. And soon a spectral, gleaming wisp of silver [illegible] in the east, and the lone scout flying east dropped in altitude to meet its sister.

Mechanically, his mind elsewhere, Chris [illegible] which reared the automatic clamp behind the cockpit in preparation for affixing the scout to the plane rack beneath the ZX 1. The dirigible far in advance of the Blue Fleet, was roaring along at its full one hundred and fifty to hover over the [illegible] of its sister. Chris eyed its course and changed his. To [illegible] the rack, he had to pass the dirigible and come up underneath [illegible]

THE air giant roared closer. As the distance between them loosened, Chris's brow wrinkled and he swore softly in puzzlement.

"Now, just what's wrong with them?" he exclaimed. "The darned sap isn't flying straight! She's wobbling in her course!"

It was hardly apparent, but true. Ever so slightly, the snub nose of the ZX-1 was swaying from side to side as it sped through the air; ever so slightly, her massive stern directional-rudders were wavering.

She was less than a mile away now. At that time, there were no other planes in sight; none flying in that vicinity save Chris's. He glued his eyes to the telescopic sight. A moment later, sheer horror swept his face.

"Good God!"

The scout leaped as its throttle rammed down. The gleaming, thousand-foot shell of the ZX-1 roared by it at equal altitude, making it a puny fly-speck in the sky. But the fly-speck was faster. It turned in a screaming bank; it straightened, it lunged back after the swaying, retreating mammoth like a whippet, lower, now, than its quarry. It maneuvered expertly as it gained, for one of the best pilots of the service was at its controls, and there were deep lines graven in his face, lines of anguish and intolerable suspense.

Through the telescopic sight, Chris had not seen a single white-clad figure standing beside the glass ports of the dirigible's control car. But he had seen, slung from the rack along her belly, a single plane—the same rather peculiar-looking plane he had seen hanging beneath the rack of the ZX-2 a few minutes before she had gone down in flames!

And in that plane, he knew surely, was the answer to the mystery.

SPEED cut to just a trifle more than the dirigible's. Chris passed a few feet underneath the

huge expanse of her lower directional rudder. From so close, its uncontrolled wavering was terrifying.

His faculties were concentrated on the task of sliding the scout's clamp into the groove of the plane rack, but he was also surveying the lone airplane hanging from it. A powerful machine, painted in Navy colors, a peculiar knob on the upper side of each half of the top wing gave it its unfamiliar appearance. Its pilot was obviously aboard the dirigible, waiting. . . .

Closer and closer the scout crept. Quarter-way now along from the nose of the massive hulk that loomed above it, and within fifty feet of the third clamp in the rack. Touchy work, maneuvering into it, with the ZX-1 yawing as she was, and the wind for have desperate. Chris's hands were glued to the stick, his nerves were as taut as violin strings. Then, when only ten feet from the rack clamp, he gave a startled jump of uncomprehending amazement.

The propeller of the mysterious plane ahead had roared over. Its plump had left the rack; it had dropped down in a perfectly controlled dive and flattened out as if a master pilot were at its controls.

But the plane's cockpit was still empty. Chris could see; nor had he seen any figure pass down the ladder from the dirigible into it!

Devoid of all emotion save bewilderment, he sat stupidly in the scout. A moment later, so well had he aimed it, its clamp nestled snugly into the groove of the rack, and the regular automatic action took place. A tiny door slid open directly above in the dirigible's hull; a thin ladder craned down—and Chris's nostrils caught a faint whiff of something that cleared his mind of its confusion instantly.

Just a whiff, but it registered. Gas, with an odor resembling carbon monoxide.

He stared up. Over the edge of the automatic trap-door above, a white, contorted face was hanging. The dirigible swung; white-clad shoulders and body slumped into view. Then, with a rush, the body slipped through, jarred against the connecting ladder, slithered off and went twisting and turning into the gulf below.

"God!"

Gassed! How, by what, Chris had no idea. A moment before he had been about to follow the uncannily piloted plane, but now his duty was plain. He knew with awful certainty that in minutes, seconds perhaps, the giant ZX-1 was scheduled to roar into flames like its sister and plunge into the Pacific.

He jerked out a gas mask. He was fitting it on with one hand as, with the other, he hauled himself up the spider ladder into the hull of the thundering, yawing dirigible.

He did not see, hovering a few hundred yards behind the ZX-1, the mystery plane; he did not see it now begin to approach the rack once more.

THE crew of that dirigible of death, Chris discovered, had not had a chance. White-clad bodies lay sprawled throughout the cabin which contained the mechanism of the plane rack, stricken down silently at their posts. There was no life, no sound save the booming of the motors and the whip of the wind screaming past the uncontrolled air titan.

But he did not pause there. He did not know what he was grappling with—it seemed black magic—but he darted to a ladder which angled up from the lowermost entrance cabin to the cat-walk that stretched from the nose to the stern of the ship. If any infernal contrivance had been planted aboard, it would be in the most vital spot.

Heart pumping from the artificial air he was breathing and from the

sness that each second might well be his last he sprinted along the interior gangway. Above was the vasty gloom of the gas bags and the interweaving latticework of the supporting girders; the drum of power-car motors and the strained creakings of cables and supports echoed weirdly throughout. Outside was the sun and the sea and the clean air, but this realm of mammoth shapes and dimness seemed apart from the world. Once he stumbled against something soft and yielding—a body flung down there in death, fingers at its throat. And there were other white-clad figures, grimly marking off the length of the cat-walk. . . .

Chris's nerves were raw and his face dripping with sweat beneath its mask when suddenly he stopped at sight of something that lay on the cat-walk, with the main fuel tanks on the girders just above it and the entrance to the control car just below.

IT was a black box, perhaps two feet square and a foot in depth, made of dull metal that did not reflect the rays of the light bulb placed at the head of the ladder leading down in the control car. There were three curious little dials on its face, and the trembling finger of each one was mounting.

It had been strategically placed. An explosion at that point would rip open the fuel tanks, split the largest gas bag, wreak havoc on an intricate cluster of main girders, and destroy the control car with its mechanism.

"No wonder the ZX-2 crashed!" Chris muttered.

Then his hands swept down. The next instant he was hugging the thing tight to his chest and stumbling down into the control car, hearing only a high-pitched, impatient whine that was coming from the box as the fingers of its dials crept slowly inward.

The ZX-1 was wavering wildly as her rudders flopped from side to side, and with every swing the bodies that lay in her control car, strangled by gas, stirred slightly. The gray-haired commander was stretched there, one arm limply rolling as his ship, which had gone so suddenly from him, rolled. Subordinate officers were tumbled around him. Death rode the control car.

But down to it and through it now came one who was alive, a figure made grotesque by the mask it wore and the pack of the parachute strapped to it, who threaded past the littered bodies, an ever-rising whine wailing from the box clasped in his arms.

With a leap, he was at one of the car's port-holes, fingers fumbling at the heavy bolts. The seconds seemed eternal, and the box's whine had become a shattering, sinister scream when at last the bolts loosened. The round pane of glass teetered back, swung open—and the masked man slung his metal burden out, out from the ZX-1 into the gulf between sea and sky.

It arced through the sunlight, went spinning down, became a dot, its screaming faded. Then something synchronized within it, and it was gone—in a burst of weird, bluish light, whose fangs forked upwards for a second, their unearthly flash dimming even the sunlight, and then were gone, too. . . .

CHRIS found that his whole body was shaking. For a moment he stood there with his masked face through the port.

"Damn close," he muttered. "But what was it that left the box here?"

Then he jarred against the side of the car as the ship swung and came back to realization of what was needed to be done, and done at once. He shifted his gaze, drew his head back, and thrust it forth again, staring.

"Good Lord!" he cried. "That plane's come back!"

His own craft was not alone under the rack. The same mysterious machine hung there again, its cockpit empty, and the automatic spider ladder was stretched down to it from the trap-door in the dirigible above.

"Whatever flies it is aboard now." Chris thought aloud. "But it got back too late to stop me. Well, this time—"

He felt uneasy, however, almost powerless. What was this thing that had wiped out the crews of two dirigibles with deadly gas, and wrecked one of them? He spun around. The control car looked the same. But what might be moving in it? . . .

Chris carried no gun, but he extracted the service repeater from the holster of a body at his feet. Gripping it, he leaped to the helm of the dirigible. It was the work of a moment to clamp on the mechanical "iron mike," which steadied the ZX-1's mad swaying and leveled her ahead in a dead straight course. He could not cut down her speed, unless he went to each one of the hull-enclosed engine stations, and more urgent work awaited before he could afford to do that—work of sending out an S.O.S. before the weird, unseen killer and wrecker came to grips with him.

Though seeming hours, only minutes had passed since he had tooled his scout into the rack. Ahead, he could see the smudge of the Black Fleet's smoke on the horizon. Not so very far away, but a lot could happen in the distance still separating dirigible and surface craft.

HE ran back into the radio-telephone cubby, which was a division of the control car. The operator was sprawled there, limp in his seat before the shining, switch-studded panel. Chris removed the headgear of ear-phones; then he hauled one of the cubby's port-holes open, letting in a rush of cleansing air. His fingers sped quickly over the panel, a row of tubes glowed; the machinery hummed. Chris jerked off his mask.

A last faint odor was present, but he hardly noticed it, for his lips were at the mouthpiece and he was thrusting out a call for help.

"ZX-1 calling . . . ZX-1 calling . . . ZX-1—Hello!"

An answer from the flagship of the Black Fleet ahead had sounded.

"This is Travers, pilot on the ZX-1, speaking. We're coming dead for you; full speed; you'll see us in minutes. Get some planes with men capable of handling the dirigible up here immediately. The whole crew's been laid out by gas; there was a contrivance planted aboard to blow up the ship and send it down in flames as the ZX-2 was. The thing that did it—"

Crack!

A gun barked out from behind; something crashed and splintered on the radio panel. Chris felt a white-hot needle sear along the side of his head. His brain reeled; with everything dancing queerly before him in splotches of gray and black he toppled down off the seat, knowing the radio-telephone had been put out of commission by the cessation of sound in the ear-phones clamped to him.

He gripped his consciousness hard. It was like a delirium. he was lying sprawled beside the seat, twisted round so that he saw, hanging in the cubby's entrance door, an automatic, dribbling a wisp of smoke—the automatic that had just fired, but hanging there by itself, held by something he could not see!

He was only half conscious, for the scorching pain along his head was throbbing his brain dizzily, but he realized that the service repeater he had taken from the control car lay by his side, within easy reach. But, while on the verge of risking a wild

grab for it, he heard a voice, speaking very softly and with a slight thickness of accent.

"Do not move," it said. "I fire if you do. Now, listen: What did you do with the box that you found? Tell me quick, or die."

It was fantastic, unreal. There was —nothing, and yet a man, living, breathing, but invisible, was speaking! Chris could not understand; but it was at least a little relief to know he had a human to deal with. For with humans, strategy can be used. . . .

HE groaned. He saw plainly that the unseen marauder had been aboard when he had thrown the box over, and thus had not seen it explode in midair; did not know whether it had been tossed out or merely rendered harmless by being tampered with. If only the latter, it could be quickly repaired and set again. That must be the invisible man's reasoning.

Again Chris groaned. He moved an arm weakly and whispered

"Can't speak much. Come closer."

The service repeater was very close now to his right hand. And he felt a thrill when he saw the automatic come forward through the air, descend, and pause right next to his head. He sensed a man close behind him, and he heard:

"Well? Tell me, quick. Did you throw it over, or—?"

"Don't shoot!" Chris groaned. "I'll tell you. I didn't—throw it over. I took it apart to get the secret of it. I put it—there."

He pointed feebly with his right hand, thus leading the invisible man to turn his head. His legs braced imperceptibly. And then:

"Like hell!" roared Chris Travers, and shot his whole weight backwards, grasping the service gun, whipping it around and yanking the trigger three times at the same instant.

Shooting at nothing! But, even above the bunched roar of the explosions, there pierced out a howl of agony that died quickly to a sobbing moan. Chris saw the automatic drop to the floor, felt the invisible body he had crashed into jerk away. He jumped to his feet, clutched at that body, and caught thin air. He swung around, listening, the service repeater in his hand.

Out of the air somewhere before him there came the sound of low, racking gasps, and also the slow noise of feet dragging heavily towards the cubby's door, towards the ladder that led up to the fore-and-aft cat-walk.

Chris sprang, slashing the butt of the gun downwards. The lead was false. He hurtled jarringly into the door jamb, the gun thumping against the floor. The wind was knocked from him; the nausea of his wound swept him again with a surge of dizziness. But the painful scuffle of unseen feet ahead pulled him up once more; like a punch-drunk fighter he staggered out from the cubby to the ladder and hauled himself up the steps. He half-fell at the top, but his mind was clearing; and as he swayed there he knew what he had to do—saw the duty that lay before him. . . .

More slowly, he crawled after the dragging footsteps and the gasps of the invisible raider, following them through the vast dimness of the interior of the dirigible ZX-1.

THE chief operator on duty in the flagship of the Black Fleet swung round in his seat and yelled through into the bridge of the massive battleship:

"Urgent, sir! From the ZX-1!"

A moment later the captain of the ship, for the fleet's admiral was out in a launch inspecting what little of the fallen ZX-2 was still floating on the surface, was at the operator's side, listening amazedly.

The operator read off, word for

word, what Chris Travers had sent. ". . . There was a contrivance planted aboard to blow up the ship and send it down in flames as the ZX-2 was. The thing that did it is—" he finished, and fell silent on that uncompleted sentence.

The captain's lined face expressed incredulity. "My God!" he burst out. "First the ZX-2, now— That all?"

"Yes, sir. I can't get any answer or connection."

They stared at each other. Finally the captain spluttered:

"Is some maniac loose in this fleet? Don't sit there like a fool, men! Get in touch with the *Saratoga*; tell 'em what you received, tell 'em to send some men up to that dirigible, wherever she is. We can't lose both of them!"

The operator's fingers skipped nimbly, even while he was speaking into the microphone, the red-faced captain had rushed back into the central bridge and was roaring:

"Signal the Admiral back here! Hurry!"

THINGS moved quickly then, small things but significant. A casual eye glancing over the ranks of the Black Fleet as it lay around the scene of the tragedy, waiting for orders, would not have noticed any difference. The launch containing the fleet's admiral, which had been fussing about with its load of officers and various dignitaries, suddenly wheeled and pointed back for the mammoth flagship, in response to swift signals from the arms of a gob on her bridge; and, on the broad landing deck of the carrier *Saratoga*, two three-seater planes, equipped with automatic clamps for a dirigible's rack, were wheeled up to the line.

Their props were spun over. But even before their cockpits had been filled, an officer on the bridge of the flagship, and a dozen others throughout the fleet, cried:

"There she is!"

Over the eastern horizon, a gleaming sliver in the sunlight, thundered the ZX-1, straight for the array of the Black Fleet. Only a few men were aware of the drama-fraught message which had come down from her radio cubby, but her growing shape commanded the eyes of every sailor and officer alike who had time to watch. A few telescopic sights were trained on her as she bellowed ahead; the keen old eyes of a very perplexed and puzzled admiral were at one of them.

"Two planes hanging from her rack," he muttered, half to himself and half to the officers standing around him. "Both Navy. Say, they're dropping off! Not coming this way, either. Going northeast. Fast, too. Can't see 'em any more. . . . Those men getting up from the *Saratoga*? Good. We'll find out something soon. Here she comes!"

Closer and closer roared the dirigible. Two planes from the *Saratoga* were swooping up to enter her rack, but the other two planes that shortly before had been suspended from it were gone—already vanished into the northeast.

"Don't understand this at all!" said the Admiral of the Black, or Pacific Fleet of the United States Navy.

THINGS had broken well, Chris Travers considered. He had only wounded the invisible raider, but, luckily, had wounded him badly, so that, evidently, just one object was in the man's mind: to get back to where he came from, to where he could find help. He seemed oblivious of the scout that was following behind at the full speed of its mighty rotary motor, following him to his base, wherever it was.

"Just as well I didn't kill him," Chris muttered.

The rush of wind had cleared his brain; his faculties were steady an-

normal. Not so with the man in the plane he pursued. It was flying crazily, but clinging to one course, nevertheless—into the northeast, towards land, some two hundred and fifty miles over the horizon.

The great silver shape of the ZX-1, barren, now, of life, dropped away, speeding ever due west; the hazy dots and blur of smoke which denoted the motionless Black Fleet vanished. But Chris was in contact with the fleet's flagship once more, through the compact radio-telephone set of his scout. As he flew, his eyes fixed steadily on the plane ahead, he was rapping into the microphone the story of what had happened. He told of the invisibility of the strange marauder, of how accurately he had judged the time of his raids; of how he, Chris, had managed to prevent the destruction of the ZX-1.

"He uses a tremendously expansive gas resembling carbon monoxide," he went on. "It seeps into every cranny of the dirigible, killing everything. The crews got no warning; they didn't know what was happening, couldn't see him! Well, I managed to wound him on the ZX-1. He beat it. I'm following him. If he lasts out, he'll go to where he came from, and we'll find out who's in back of all this. Let you know where his base is soon as I get there. Keep listening. Okay? Right; signing off."

Silence, then, between the scout and the flagship far behind. . . .

ON—on Time passed. The scout's gas was down below the halfway mark. They had covered two hundred miles now at a speed just bordering three hundred. The plane ahead looked uncanny with its apparently empty cockpit, but Chris could see all too well that death was pressing at its invisible pilot. The big machine was literally staggering in its course as the hands on its control stick grew weaker; was yawing wildly, even as the ZX-1 had yawed after her crew had been slain by vapors they could not see.

"He's got to last out!" Chris muttered. "Got to!"

At that moment land appeared, and the fleeing plane altered its northeast course to due east with an abrupt jerk.

First it was a mere hazy line on the horizon; then it rose to a thrust of land, jutted with cloud-misted hill-tops. Then, as the two roaring specks that were airplanes came closer, heavy tropical foliage became distinct, and white slashes of surf breaking on the shore. This was the Azuero Peninsula, most western point of the Republic of Panama.

Aside from one small cluster of wretched huts, it was practically uninhabited. Guarded by dense growth, only one or two of the dusty paths which passed for roads wandered aimlessly through its tangled creepers, trees and bush. To the southeast was the broad Gulf of Panama, doorway to the Canal; on the other sides this thumb of land was surrounded by the reaches of the Pacific.

The plane was obviously nearing its eyrie—dropping lower and lower, losing speed and altitude; and also threatening each moment to tumble down out of control into the smothering welter of olive-green below, with a dead, unseen body in its cockpit.

But where was the landing field? They were now over the very heart of the Peninsula, and still Chris, searching through his telescopic sight, could see nothing but the monotonous roll of jungle. They must come to it soon, or be over to the Caribbean Sea and the Mosquito Gulf.

Then suddenly he started forward, staring. Of course there was no landing field in sight. The mystery plane needed none. It possessed the power of the helicopter: it could rise straight up or sink straight down.

From each one of the two knob-

like projections on its upper wing that had puzzled him previously, a propeller had risen and unfolded into long, flat blades. They whirled in circles of light in the sun; and the airplane beneath them poised, all but motionless, its main propeller swinging idly, and then began slowly to drop downwards.

But Chris, swooping nearby, was still perplexed. Dropping down to what? There was only the dense tropical growth beneath. He could see no trace of men, no clearing, however small, no base—nothing but the jungle.

"How in the dickens—" he began; and then stopped. At that moment the jungle's secret was revealed.

AS the helicopter-plane dropped to within a few hundred feet of it, a strip of the sea verdure split in two and reared up. It looked, at first, like magic. But from aloft Chris saw the trick and how the camouflage was worked. What appeared to be a slice of the jungle roof was, in reality, a metal framework cunningly plastered with layers of green growth. An oblong, some fifty by a hundred feet, it parted in the middle like a bridge that opens to let a steamer through, revealing the lair of the plane.

Soon more was revealed. Two tiny, green-painted huts stood in the minute clearing, and a few white-clad figures were by them, staring up at the plane sinking down and at the other plane which soared above like a buzzing mosquito.

One of the dwarfed figures in white waved an arm. The others around him darted into the left-side hut. Then the helicopter-plane's wheels touched the small space allotted for it in the clearing, and the whirling propellers halted.

"So that's the secret!" Chris muttered. He pulled the microphone of the radio-telephone to his lips and angled with the dials for connection with the fleet hundreds of miles behind, meanwhile noting his exact position on Azuero Peninsula. But before he spoke, some sixth sense bade him glance below once more.

An icy shiver gripped his body.

A thin slit had appeared in the roof of the left-side hut. A spot of bright blue light was winking evilly inside it. And, though he could not hear it, Chris knew with terrible certainty that a shrill, impatient whining was piercing from the machinery of a weapon inside that hut—a weapon whose fangs had forked close to him once before—a weapon which the winking eye of blue presaged.

It struck. But at the same instant Chris leaped desperately from the cockpit of the scout.

HE leaped almost into the teeth of the blue-tinged ray which knifed up with uncanny accuracy from the slit in the roof of the hut. He was conscious of a flash of unearthly light, of terrible heat which came with it. Only the force of his jump saved him. He pulled the rip-cord of the 'chute strapped to him and jerked to a pause; then he was swinging beneath a mushroom of white, trembling as he stared at the fate he had missed by a hair's breadth.

A web of spectral blue light had enveloped the abandoned scout. The plane appeared to shudder, hanging almost motionless in the wraith-like mist. Then, with a crackle, the wings and tail shivered into countless fragments; the stripped fuselage nosed over and plunged earthward, a roaring mass of flames. A fiery comet, it screamed past the man who swayed beneath his 'chute, coming within a few hundred feet of him and searing him with its hot breath. Then it drove into the dense flanks of the jungle growth.

Soon only a charred skeleton marked the last landing field of a scout of the dirigible ZX-1.

"And now, I guess," Chris whispered, "they'll turn that ray on me. . . ."

But he had only been a thousand feet up when he jumped. Already he was close to the top of the jungle. The clearing and its huts disappeared from view; he was out of range of the swift-striking ray. And, he reflected, though the scout was gone, he was still free—and could get to the Canal. . . .

But tropical growth is difficult to land in.

A moment later his swinging body crashed through the branches of a tree, and he pitched forward, unable to control the impetus. A sudden shock of pain stabbed through his head and everything spun dizzily before him. He knew he was falling, jerking down as the parachute ripped on the boughs. There was another impact which drove all remaining consciousness from him.

Darkness washed over Chris Travers, lying limp beneath the shreds of a silky white shroud. . . .

ELECTRIC light. A strong glare of it somewhere. A dull throbbing in his head. Then, a voice, with queer, hissing s's, speaking very close to him.

"Ah, yess. Look you, Kashtanov. He will be conscious soon, I think."

"You're a damned fool, Istafiev, to let him wake up," said another voice, cool and of easy correctness. "He'll see the machines. And these Americans are tricky—one can never tell."

"Tricky? Bah! This fellow is a service man; there are things I can learn from him. Come, now, wake yourself properly, you! That glass of water, throw it on his face."

Kashtanov—Istafiev. Names that could belong to only one country, to that huge power overseas which was hovering, so said rumors, on the brink of war, waiting only for a favorable opportunity to strike—the country which the war game around the Canal had been designed to impress. Chris Travers' mind cleared just then with complete comprehension of who had schemed to send both dirigibles down and who had built this secret lair on Aruero Peninsula.

Inwardly, he groaned. It was all too plain. The destruction of the ZX-2 and the thwarted destruction of her sister had only been the first step of some gigantic plan which was to provide the opportunity for the mighty fighting machine overseas to strike. And he, who might have balked it, had made a rotten landing from the scout and delivered himself, helpless by his own clumsiness, into the hands of these men. The self-accusation was bitter.

With their secret of invisibility, their deadly blue rays, what havoc couldn't they wreak, working from their cunningly concealed base?

And now they were waiting for him to recover consciousness—waiting to question him before killing him. . . .

But as he lay there, apparently still senseless, Chris was grappling with the seemingly hopeless problem. So, even when he felt the tingling coldness of a spray of water on his cheeks, not one line of his face moved, nor did the tiniest flutter of eyelids betray him.

Although the fumbled landing in the jungle had been a catastrophe, it had granted him his only weapon. He was believed to be genuinely unconscious.

"Another—he iss stubborn," hissed the voice of the man called Istafiev. "His senses will soon come. I can bring them back—oh, yess!"

"Enough of this!" complained the suave, beautifully modulated voice. "Darkness is coming; there's a lot to be done. Shoot him and throw him out!"

"It iss I who am in command here, comrade Kashtanov. Remember that. I desire to speak to this man. There!

No? No sign yet? Well! We will see if this helps those eyes of yours to open, my American!"

Then began sheer torture.

IT was an ordeal of silence. By no motion, sound or slightest sign of consciousness could he seek relief. Inanimate Chris Travers lay, holding his pose sturdily, although it seemed that the sweat was spurting from the pores, while a thin, cruel knife-blade drove into the quivering nerves beneath his left thumb-nail.

Deeper and deeper it inched, accompanied by the soft breathing of the man who guided it, until Chris felt one great sob of pain welling up inside him, struggling to break past his lips; felt a tremendous urge to writhe, to break away from the digging steel. His tongue seemed to be trembling, shivering; but no other part of his body, not even the smallest flicker of eyelash, betrayed him. At long last there came a voice, sounding as if from miles away, and the disgust in it was very good to Lieutenant Christopher Travers.

"Bah! It is no use. His thick skull must be fractured. I could cut him open and he would not awake. He might be conscious for minutes after some hours—no, do not shoot him. I shall learn a few details from him then. Throw him over there. Now—Zenalishin is dead, but the mask and cylinder on him should be returned to visibility. Well, we will return him, too. Then, Kashtanov, to your instructions and your work."

Hands gripped Chris's body. He felt himself thud against a wall, and slumped into a heap, head lolling over. The cessation of pain was sweet, though his thumb was raw, but sweeter still was the knowledge that he had won the first tussle; that he was deemed to be harmlessly unconscious for hours.

And carefully, through his lashes, he permitted himself a glimpse of the room he lay in, and the men whom he had heard and felt but not yet seen.

IT seemed more like the belly of a submarine than a room, that maze of tubes, levers, wheels, switchboards and queer metallic shapes; and the blur cast upon his vision by barely raised eyelashes made it appear doubly unreal and grotesque. It might have been another world.

Some of it was recognizable. A massive radio-telephone set, by which, he judged, all communications between the fleets in the Pacific were overheard; a squat dynamo; a set of huge cylinders, from which, probably, had come the highly expansive gas that had snuffed out the crews of the two dirigibles. But there were other things—strange, monstrous. One of them, the tapered tube of metal that angled up to the hut's ceiling, its base a mass of wheels and dials and tubing, was evidently the weapon of the ray that had struck the scout down.

There were three men visible in the room, and Chris switched his attention now to them.

Two were standing by a table in the center of the room, directly under a shaft of light from a powerful electric bulb. The shorter of them was saying to a third man, who knelt in front of the dynamo:

"On full." Then, as a full-throated drone pulsed from it: "Zenalishin is there? Yes. Put him in."

The voice of the hissing s's—that was Istafiev. Short, stocky, black-haired, he was a direct contrast to the tall figure next him of one whose pointed black beard gave elegance to sharp, thin features. He carried a gun at his waist, and he identified himself as Kashtanov by saying languidly:

"Better strap him in. He'll fall, otherwise. Get some cord; I'll lift him."

The other man, by the dynamo, ap-

parently a subordinate mechanic, dull-faced, drew a loop of cord from a box nearby, while Kashtanov went through actions that seemed fantastic. He stooped, groped along the floor, and then gripped what looked like thin air with his fingers and lifted upwards. But it wasn't air, Chris knew; it was the invisible body of a man—the man who had destroyed the ZX-2, the man whom he had shot at in the cubby of the ZX-1—whose invisibility was now to be stripped from him.

By what? Carefully Chris swivelled his gaze around until it caught on an object which dwarfed Istafiev, now waiting by its side with one hand on the small panel of a switchboard.

A STRANGE thing, truly, to find in a little hut on Azuero Peninsula! Row upon row of slender curved tubes, describing a three-quarter ovoid so that there was an opening for entrance in front, rose to a height of some eight feet, the whole topped by a curious glassy dome which was filled with creamy substance. There was room inside the layers of tubes for a man's body to stand upright—and a man's body was upright in it now, held by cords strapped to his unseen arms.

Invisibility! The dream of scientists for years! Here created, here taken away—by the simple manipulation of two levers on the control panel.

Intently Chris watched Istafiev pull down the right-side lever.

As it came down, the creamy liquid in the dome above the cage began to swirl slowly, then to froth and boil and whip round and round, while thick, dropsical bubbles slid up from its heaving surface and burst, discharging a kind of grayish mist, under which the white substance sank, until there was nothing left in the dome but drab-colored vapor. On the completion of this stage, the layers of tubes below warmed into life. They glowed with a soft vari-colored brightness that filled the cage with a golden splendor and seemed to rim each one of the watching men with fire.

"See you, Kashtanov," came Istafiev's voice. "The refractive index, lowered to that of air to produce invisibility, iss being raised again—all through a simple adaptation of Roentgen's theories! The substance above, mark, in the dome, which this morning you saw affect Zenalishin's blood and the pigment of his hair so that the vibrations would render his colorless tissues transparent, iss now reversing. Soon—see!—already he becomes visible!"

Something was growing in the heart of the ribbons of color, and Chris strained his shrouded eyes to discern what it was.

Black lines, standing out in the dazzling welter of light—lines that grew and became more solid as he peered at them—lines that were shaping into a recognizable form, the form of a man's skeleton!

The effect was that of an X-ray. A skeleton hung in the cage, held steady by the cords around its arms, its naked skull with yawning eye-pits grinning out at the four men in the room. Soon other details became visible: black lumps that were organs, the web of fine thin lines that were veins; and then a hazy, ghostly outline of flesh that quickly assumed solidity, burying the bones and veins and organs which had been first apparent.

AND all the time the dynamo was filling the hut with its sweeping drone, and the million points of light flung from the intercrossing flame-tongues inside the cage were dancing madly on the walls and floor and ceiling, making the whole scene unreal, fantastic, as from a dream. . . .

"There! That iss enough," said Istafiev.

The lever went back. The streaks of blue-white that threaded the cage died; the grayish vapor in the dome above faded away, leaving more of the creamy, bleaching substance than had been there originally; the dynamo was shut off, and silence fell in the room. A naked man with a very white, peaked face and a blotch of blood encrimsoning his neck hung inside the cage, his head pitched over lifelessly to one side.

Chris stared, almost forgetting the pose of unconsciousness in his bewilderment. A queer mechanism shaped in the form of a cylinder from some oddly sparkling, almost transparent material, was clasped to the nude body's chest; over the nose and mouth was another small attachment of the same substance. A nozzle midway in the large cylinder's front side gave him the clue; from it, obviously, had come the gas which had strangled the crews of the dirigibles, and the covering over nose and mouth was a novel gas mask. The material they were made of could, obviously, be rendered invisible—a virtue not possessed by ordinary inorganic substances. Invisible death from an invisible container, carried by an invisible man!

"Yess, dead," hissed Istafiev, probing the motionless, naked body. "He just got here, told what had happened, and died. He was hurt too badly to think of taking off the gas cylinder or putting on a coat. Well, it makes no difference. . . . Here, Grigory, take off the mask and cylinder and bury him. And you, Kashtanov, look well at this."

From the table, he picked up a large white piece of cardboard and tapped it meaningly. There were two broad lines on it, running side by side through other smaller lines and shaded patches, and there was also a thick black arrow pointing to one particular place on it.

The chart was easy to understand. Chris Travers recognized it immediately, and his heart seemed to stop for a moment as he did.

Their first step had been the dirigibles; their second was a blow which paled the other into insignificance. And Chris told himself desperately:

"It can't go through! It can't!"

The lines on the cardboard were a detailed map of the Panama Canal; and the black arrow pointed unerringly to its most vulnerable, unguarded and vital point, the Gatun Spillway, which, if wrecked, would put the whole intricate Canal hopelessly out of commission.

ISTAFIEV was speaking again, in low, terse tones, oblivious of the desperate resolve forming in Chris's brain.

"Only one of the dirigibles had been destroyed. Well, it iss too bad, but not fatal to the plan. The ZX-1 can hamper our country's operations when she strikes, but if the ZX-2 were also in action, they would be hampered much more—perhaps fatally. It iss not serious. So we go ahead. Now, Kashtanov, for the last time, the scheme of wrecking Gatun Spillway iss this:

"Note, here, the small golf course. That iss your landing space. You know its location; a mile, perhaps, from Gatun Dam and the spillway. At night, there iss no one near it or on it. You drop down to the golf course from seven thousand feet; the helicopter motors are muffled, and no one will hear you come. Some of the stretches of the course are secluded and hidden by the surrounding jungle; choose one of these to land on. Well, that iss easy.

"The spillway iss about midway in Gatun Dam; its channel has been cut through a hill. You come along the side of this channel right up close to the spillway—close, remember!—and leave the box there. The range of the rays, you know, iss two hundred feet; set them to fire one

minute after you leave the box. They will destroy the seven gates of the spillway and also part of the dam and the hydro-electric station. Gatun Lake will then empty itself; the canal will be half drained; the power will be gone—it will take half a year to repair it all. The ZX-1 can fly up to the east coast, thanks to Zenalishin's fumbling—yess; but these American fleets are massed in the Pacific; they will have to go around South America to reach the Atlantic—and that will take weeks.

"And in that time the Soviet has crossed the Atlantic uncontested and has paralyzed the heart of America, her eastern states. Ah, it iss magnificent!"

BUT Kashtanov's thoughts were elsewhere. Peering hard at the chart, he said:

"I have a minute to get clear, eh? Well, I can do that; but won't the water sweeping through from Gatun Lake after the spillway is wrecked catch me?"

"No. You run up the hill the spillway channel is cut through; it iss high ground, and the golf course iss on high ground. No one will see you coming or going, naturally, and the box iss not big enough to be noticed at night. The noise of its equalizers will be covered by the water coming through the spillway. It iss—what they say?—fool-proof. You cannot fail, Kashtanov. And—" he broke into swift-flowing, liquid Russian, his swarthy face lighting up, his arms waving, one of them slapping the other's back.

"Stop the dramatics," said Kashtanov, "and speak in English. I've worked so long in America, Russian is hard to understand. Time to begin?"

Istafiev glanced at a watch on his wrist. "A few minutes. Look you." He went to a side locker in the room, opened it, hauled out with both hands a box of plain dull metal, and put it on the table. It was larger than the one Chris Travers had seen on the ZX-1, but otherwise similar.

"A double charge of nitro-lanarline iss in this," murmured Istafiev complacently. "Imagine it, when released! You know the working well, do you not? Yess. Well, I put it in the plane, ready." He stepped to the hut's single door and passed out. Through it Chris could see the tiny clearing, dark under the camouflaged framework, now closed once more; the light from the hut showed him the wings of the helicopter-plane standing there. He heard, moreover, the sound of a shovel from somewhere, and knew that a lonely grave was being dug in the wilderness. Then Istafiev shouted:

"Grigory! That grave, make it wide, make room for two." He came back and peered sidewise at Chris. "Not conscious yet?" A foot thudded into the American's side. "No. Well, I see to him when you are gone, Kashtanov. Yess, thick darkness iss here. Time to begin. Take off your clothes."

CHRIS was now keenly alert, poised, ready for any chance that might come. The odds were two or three to one, and a gun into the bargain, but the stakes were higher than any ever played for before; and a stroke had to be made, no matter how seemingly hopeless. Through his lashes he watched, turned things over in his mind—and something leaped within him when he saw Kashtanov unbuckle the gun around his waist and lay it down, meanwhile taking off the clothes he was wearing; and when he heard the question which followed, and Istafiev's answer.

Naked, lean-muscled and sinewy, Kashtanov paused before the door of the cage. "How will this affect me?" he asked. "Painful?"

"You will be conscious of no sensation. You will see me, yess, and

the room, but you will be paralyzed completely while the power is on."

"Paralyzed, eh?" murmured Kashtanov. "Well, let's go," and he placed himself inside the cage.

Paralyzed, when the power was on! In effect, that left only Istafiev in the room; the man Grigory was outside, and the noise of the dynamo would drown any shouts for help. And Kashtanov's gun was on the table . . .

Imperceptibly, Chris's muscles tensed as he judged the distance to the table and reckoned out each movement after the first leap. One sweeping blow with the gun would put Istafiev safely out of action; then he could be bound and Grigory summoned and tied also at the point of the gun. If, by that time, Kashtanov was invisible inside the cage, the levers could be reversed and his body brought back to visibility and bound.

Then—a call broadcast from the boat's radio-telephone to headquarters at the Canal and the fleets in the Pacific!

"It'll work," Chris told himself. "It's damn well got to!"

But a certain part of the invisibility machine did not enter his plan.

THE creamy liquid in the glassy dome began, as before, to swirl slowly; but apart from that its action was different. The white mass, instead of discharging the vapor-laden bubbles, became a whipping, highly agitated whirlpool as the tubes below glowed softly and ribbons of golden light snaked out and laced through the nude body of Kashtanov. The liquid above flowed rapidly in a complete circle, its center sucked hollow, exactly as a glass quarter-filled with water behaves when rotated quickly. Thus the outer surface of the dome, coated inside with the milky liquid, gleamed and scintillated as the whirl of light struck it and danced off it; and it even became dimly reflective.

In seconds Kashtanov's figure lost definite outline and assumed a ghostly transparency that bared the internal organs and veins; and then his skeleton appeared.

Istafiev was facing the control panel. As he gathered his limbs for the decisive leap, Chris's eyes were on his stocky back. But Istafiev was watching keenly the gleaming, glassy dome above.

He was surveying the action of the white substance and judging the time of the process by it. Then suddenly his vision centered on something that had seemed to move on the surface of the dome.

Something had moved. Chris, lying against the wall behind, had opened his eyes fully, had dragged back his legs beneath him and balanced himself for his leap. And, in distorted perspective, his actions were reflected on the dome.

Just for a second he poised—then sprang.

The speed Istafiev showed seemed foreign to the build of his body. In an instant he had whirled from the switchboard, fingers not lingering to release Kashtanov, and leaped.

THEY met at the table. Two hands shot out for the gun lying on it. Chris grabbed it first. But he paid for his speed. The swipe he had aimed with his left arm went wild; a fist thudded into his stomach and belted the wind from him, and he felt his gun wrist seized and wrenched back.

Gasping for breath, dizzy, only the fighting instinct enabled him to crane a leg behind the other and throw his whole weight forward. The planks of the floor shivered under the two bodies that toppled onto them.

There was a melee on the floor, furious, savage, mad. In cold fact, it lasted merely for seconds; but Chris

was grappling with a man whose strength was as desperate as his own, and who had not been weakened by a solar plexus blow or a cramping wait of hours in one position: the American had passed through an eternity of physical and mental agony when Istafiev, hunching up, strained the finger of his right hand upward, searching for the gun trigger.

One stubby finger found it. Istafiev grunted. The gun trembled from the force of the hands disputing its direction; then its ugly snout, stuck out parallel to the floor, and began to creep slowly downwards as Istafiev bore on it with all his might.

"So!" he hissed. "It was clever, your little game, but it is finished!"

But Chris, undermost, had braced his elbow on the floor. The gun held. Every ounce of his strength went into holding that one position, into keeping the weapon's muzzle away; he was therefore not prepared for Istafiev's sudden strategy.

There was a quick pull, a tug. Istafiev had wrenched himself over, reversing their positions and dragging Chris uppermost—and, as the American's balance was destroyed, the gun whipped up and fired.

A bullet sang past his head. It missed by inches. But from behind came a sound as of rending cloth. The glassy dome above the cage of the machine had splintered into countless fragments.

The effect was amazing. The shafts of light from the machine's tube ceased; creamy liquid dribbled out from the cracked dome, and, as it met the air, frothed into billows of dense gray smoke. In seconds, the room was choked with a thick, foggy vapor that obscured every object in it as well as the blackest of moonless nights.

ISTAFIEV had not fired again, could not. With a quick, frantic wrench and twist Chris had knocked the gun from his hand, and it had slithered away, now lost in the bunching smoke. But Istafiev's other hand, steel-ribbed with tense muscles, had darted like a snake into the American's throat, and under that iron, relentless grip Chris was weakening. His head was whirling, the old wound throbbing waves of nausea through him. Desperately he tried to struggle loose, flailing with his legs—but useless. He knew he was slipping; slipping. . . .

Then, out of the gray, all-hiding mist, came a voice.

"Istafiev! Where are you? Call! The machine's broken; I'm out and invisible. Where is the American?"

Kashtanov!

Istafiev hissed:

"It is all right. He will be finished in a moment. But you—go! The box is aboard the plane; don't wait! You must not take chance of being hurt. Go to your work. Call Grigory in. Go, Kashtanov!"

"I go, Istafiev."

"No, you don't!" Chris Travers croaked almost inaudibly. "*You don't!*"

Thought of the Canal lying there defenseless, of Kashtanov speeding towards it on his wrecker's errand, kindled within him a strength that was unnatural, superhuman. Like a wildcat he tore loose from the choking grip on his throat; Istafiev tried to subdue that sudden, unlooked-for surge of power, but could not. Five piston-like, jabbing blows crunched into him from Chris's hurtling fist, and with the fifth Istafiev faded quietly out of the picture. . . .

Chris sprang up and started a leap for the door he could not see. A body brushed against him; dimly through the smoke he saw the man called Grigory, and Grigory saw him, but not for long. A whaling swing lifted him two inches clear of the floor, and then he went down onto the peacefully recumbent Istafiev; and Chris Travers, fighting mad

stormed from the hut into the clearing outside.

The camouflaged framework had been raised; soft motors were purring helicopter propellers around and lifting a plane up towards the stars hanging high above.

The airplane was already feet off the ground and sweeping straight up. A sane man wouldn't have thought of it, but Chris wasn't quite sane just then. With a short sprint, he launched himself into a flying leap, grabbed out desperately—and felt the bar of the undercarriage between his hands.

The plane jolted. Then it steadied, rose with terrific acceleration. And Chris hauled himself up onto the undercarriage and clung to one of the wheel-stanchions, breathing hard, hidden by the fuselage from the invisible pilot.

The clearing and the hut, with smoke billowing from it, dropped into nothingness. The night enclosed the helicopter-plane.

FROM the air, Panama Canal at night is a necklace of lights strung across the thin neck of land that separates sea from sea. Then, as a high-flying plane drops lower, the beads of light loosen into widely separated patches, which are the locks; between them the silky black ribbon of water runs, now widening into a dim, hill-girt lake, now narrowing as it passes through massive Culebra Cut, then widening again as it comes to the artificial Gatun Lake, at the far end of which stands Gatun Dam and its spillway.

Silence hung close over the Canal. The last ship had passed through; the planes that daily maneuver over it had returned to their hangars; the men who shepherd ships through the locks had gone either to bed or to Panama City or Colon. The Canal, as always at night, seemed almost deserted.

Chris, clutching tight to his hazardous perch, it looked utterly deserted. The ride had been nightmare-like, fraught every second with peril. Several times the whip of wind had come near tearing him loose; the cold air of the upper layers had numbed his fingers, his whole body; he was chilled and, experiencing the inevitable let-down which comes after a great effort, miserable. Just then, the task ahead appeared well-nigh impossible.

The only thing in his favor was that Kashtanov apparently did not know he was aboard, since the plane had flown evenly, steadily, not trying to shake off the man hanging to its landing gear by somersaulting in the sky. Evidently the jolt as it was rising hadn't warned the unseen pilot; the fog from the broken machine had obscured Chris's wild leap.

But what, he thought, of that? The element of surprise was in his favor—but how to gain advantage by it? He had no weapon, nothing save bare hands with which to subdue a foe as elusive as the wind that was now hurtling by him. Clinging there, slipping now and again, drenched with cold, the odds looked hopeless.

Then, suddenly, the booming of the main motor stopped. Only a quiet purring from the wings took its place. The helicopter-plane hovered almost motionless, quiet and deadly like a sinister bird of prey. It began to drop straight down through the dark. Chris Travers glanced below.

THERE, misty, fainty, small as the toy of a child, lay Gatun Dam with the spillway in its center.

Chris stared. So small the dam looked—this dream of an engineer, this tiny outpost of man's genius thrust boldly into the breast of the tropics, holding back a whole lake with its cement flanks, enabling ocean to be linked to ocean! It was the heart of the Canal; if burst, the veins would be drained.

Something that cannot be caught in words seemed to seize the lone American then. As in a trance, he saw more than the dam; he saw what it symbolized. He saw the Frenchmen who had tried to thrust the Canal through first, and who had failed, dying in hundreds. He saw the men of his own race who had carried that mighty work on; saw them gouging through the raw earth and moving mountains, tiny figures doing the work of giants; saw them stricken down by fever and disease, saw others fill the empty files and go on, never wavering. He saw them complete it and seal the waters in captivity with the dam that lay below. . . .

And with that vision of stupendous achievement, cold, weariness, hopelessness passed from Chris Travers, and swept clean away. The odds that had loomed so large fell into insignificance.

The golf course spread out and became dimly visible as the plane dropped cautiously down. Away to the left there were the few twinkling lights of Gatun Dam, whitening the crests of the waters that tumbled through the spillway. Their drone was dully audible. On every other side dark rolling hills stretched, covered in untamed jungle growth. The golf course was shrouded by them. Its smooth sward made a perfect landing place; an ordinary plane might alight there.

Lower, lower, ever so slowly. A bare one hundred feet, now. Chris scanned the lay of the land. Right close to the spot Kashtanov had chosen to set the plane down on was a deep sand-trap, put there to snare unskilful golfers. Chris steadied himself on the cross-bar.

"I'll have to go up over the side and grab him," he planned. "Then hold on to his throat till I feel him go limp."

The wheels of the plane touched gently, and she settled to rest.

IN one furious movement Chris was off and springing up the side of the fuselage into the single cockpit, his hands clutching for the invisible man who sat there.

He heard a croak of alarm; then his fingers thumbed into bare flesh and slid up over a nude shoulder to the throat. They tightened, bored in, held with terrible pressure. Sprawled over the cockpit, he clung grimly to what seemed nothing more than air.

Spattering noises came from somewhere. An unseen body thrashed frantically. Transparent hands clawed over the American's frame, worried at him. But he held his grip, tightening it each second. There was a gasping, choking sound, a desperate writhe, another scratching of the invisible hands—and then came what Chris had feared, what he could not guard against since his eyes could not forewarn him. A heavy monkey-wrench appeared to rise of its own accord from the floor of the cockpit and come swinging at his head.

He ducked at the last second. But it clipped him; his brain whirled dizzily. The next moment he slithered off the plane and fell to the ground, dragging the unseen Kashtanov with him. And as he pitched into the damp grass, the shock dislodged his grip.

He was up in a flash, but the damage was done. The monkey-wrench curved through the darkness in a vicious swipe that landed it flush against his jaw; swung back, pounded again like a trip-hammer—again and again and again. . . .

Chris reeled back, teetered on the edge of nothingness, then went tumbling crazily down into the sand-trap behind. One leg was doubled underneath him as he crashed.

A voice floated down out of the darkness. "That is the end of you!" it said. But Chris Travers did not hear it. . . .

PAIN. Agonizing pain. The whole lower side of his face was a burning, throbbing, aching lump of flesh, and his left leg seemed on fire. What had happened? Where was he?

Then came remembrance, and it was far worse than the fangs of pain that were gnawing him. Chris cried out—a cracked, twisted cry. Kashtanov, the dam—the box of the ray! How much time had passed?

He hunched his body over and stared up. Limned against the starlight were the wings of a plane, still standing where it had landed beside the sand-trap. He clutched his thoughts. The plane meant—it meant Kashtanov had gone on his errand, had not yet returned? Only minutes had gone by since the blows from the monkey-wrench. But was the box placed yet? Was Kashtanov already hurrying back?

He listened. From far away came a drone that was separate from the throbbing of his head. The drone of waters, controlled waters. The normal sound of the spillway of Gatun Dam. The box had not yet unleashed its disintegrating bolt of blue.

"I've got to stop it!" he whispered.

He tried to rise. Only one leg held. The other twisted awrily with a rasp of broken bones. A spearing pain tore through him. Useless! His fall had broken it. He could not rise, could not walk, with but one leg. He was no more than a cripple.

"Oh, God!" he groaned. "How can I, how can I?"

Then his eyes fell on the plane resting above him.

"I've got two legs," he muttered, and rose to his hands and knees, eyes [illegible]. The right leg was left limp. Yet—

He rolled over. He clawed with the right leg and clawed at the bank of the sand-trap. Inch by inch he wormed up, slipping, scraping. The sand grated into his battered face and seeped through onto his tongue; he coughed and spluttered, groaning from the effort and his feebleness. Spots of blood showed black against the crazy course he left behind him; ages seemed to pass before he thrust his head over the top of the bank, dug his chin into it and pulled onto level ground. Ages, but in reality only seconds, and the whole Canal—America—lying at the mercy of what each one of those seconds might unloose!

BUT the plane was near now, and it almost seemed that some unseen force mightier than the strength of men hauled Chris's broken body to it and up the stretch of its fuselage-side into the cockpit.

Ordinarily, he should have been delirious from the pain of jaw and leg, but the controls of the plane were before him and he saw nothing else. Wings and propeller were better than legs! He was in his element; by the sixth sense of born airmen he knew and could handle any flying machine, no matter how foreign.

In a second, his fingers had fumbled onto the starting button. The choke of the motor and then its full-throated roar were sweet to his ears.

The lonely golf course and the night re-echoed with the bellow of twelve pistons thrusting in line; watching, one would not have dreamed that a cripple was at the controls of the plane that now swung around with a blast of power, leveled its nose down the course and raced smoothly over close-clipped grass. Its wheels bumped, spun on the ground and lifted into air.

A mile to the dam! Istafiev's words came back to him. It would take Kashtanov twenty minutes at least, for he would go cautiously. But how long had passed—how long? That was the agonizing question.

Staring forward through the hurtling prop, the night rushed at him; the dark hills melted away to either side; clear ground swept into view.

and then a long black thread that was the spillway channel. Behind was the bubbling, leaping flow of the spillway itself, and Gatun Dam. The smooth cement sides were as yet unharmed.

"Thank God!" Chris muttered. "Now, where—where?"

A stream of light flowed out from the hydro-electric station on the left side of the spillway channel. The opposite bank was bare, running right up to the face of the dam, beneath the spillway's seven gates. There the box was to be placed. But from the air, the light was uncertain, deceptive—and a little two-foot-square box was all he had to go by!

"I can't see!" Chris said hoarsely. "I can't see!"

LIKE a roaring black meteor the plane hurtled over the banks of the spillway, the eyes of its pilot scouring the ground. It zoomed just in time to miss the wall of the dam, banked, doubled like a scared jackrabbit, dove down again, coming within feet of the spillway channel. Mad, inspired flying! But what good could it do?

Then from its cockpit came a yell.

"There! There! By heaven, I can make it!"

Two or three hundred feet—it was not clear just how far—from the face of the dam, on the bare right bank of the channel, a tiny pin-prick of black was moving slowly along. It seemed to move by itself through the air. And now, as the screaming plane banked again and came rushing closer, the pin-prick grew into a black box that suddenly stopped its advance, held motionless some four feet off the ground. Though the man who held it was not visible, Chris could fancy him staring up at the plane, could fancy the look of consternation on his unseen face.

Two hundred feet was the range of the rays! Was Kashtanov that close? Obviously the controls had not yet been set, for he still held the box. But he could switch them on in a second and fling the deadly machine up towards the dam, if he were at present just out of range. A second—a second!

"Damn you, here goes!" roared Chris.

He wrenched the stick way over. The plane appeared to hang crazily on one wing. Then it leveled off and stuck its nose down, flipping its tail up, and down—down—down it bellowed, with no hope in the world of ever coming out of its insane plunge.

What he saw in that last momentary glimpse was burned forever into Chris Travers' memory. There was the black box, hanging in the air straight before the plane's thundering nose; there, behind it, the black tide of the spillway waters; and, still further behind, he could see the other bank and the hydro-electric station, and a few tiny figures that rushed out from it just then to see what some fool flyer was doing.

All this flashed into his sight, etched against the sable night as if in flame. Then the plane's snout smashed into the black box hanging before it, and the propeller crunched through a naked, invisible body. A ragged scream that marked the passing of Kashtanov split through the air for a flash of time, and the dark, blurred mass that was an airplane teetered clean over and flopped into the rushing spillway channel.

THE men who had scrambled out from the hydro-electric station stared at each other blankly. One of them stuttered:

"But—he did that deliberately! Nothing went wrong with his ship! I saw him! He seemed to be diving at something!"

"Come on!" snapped another. "We might be able to get him out. A mad fool like that's just the kind who'll live through it."



His head reared itself from the ground.

The Terror from the Depths

By Sewell Peaslee Wright

"GOOD afternoon, sir," nodded Correy as I entered the navigating room. He glanced down at the two gleaming three-dimensional navigating charts and drummed restlessly on the heavy frame.

"Afternoon, Mr. Correy. Anything of interest to report?"

"Not a thing, sir!" growled my fire-eating first officer. "I'm about ready to quit the Service and get a job on one of the passenger liners, just on the off chance that something exciting might eventually happen."

"You were born a few centuries too late," I chuckled. Correy loved a fight more than any man I ever

Commander John Hanson challenges an appalling denizen of the watery world Hydrot

knew. "The Universe has become pretty well quieted down."

"Oh, it isn't that, it's just this infernal routine. Just one routine patrol after another; they should call it the Routine Patrol Service. That's what the silver-sleeves at the Base are making of it, sir."

At the moment, Correy meant every word he said. Even old-timers develop cases of nerves, now and then, on long tours of duty in small ships like the *Ertak*. Particularly men like Correy, whose bodies crave physical action.

There wasn't much opportunity for physical activity on the *Ertak*; she was primarily a fighting ship, small and fast, with every inch of space devoted to some utilitarian use. I knew just how Correy felt, because I'd felt the same way a great many times. I was young, then, one of the youngest commanders the Special Patrol Service had ever had, and I recognized Correy's symptoms in a twinkling.

"WE'LL be re-outfitting at the Arpan sub-base in a couple of days," I said carelessly. "Give us a chance to stretch our legs. Have you seen anything of the liner that spoke to us yesterday?" I was just making conversation, to get his mind out of its unhealthy channel.

"The *Kabir*? Yes, sir; we passed her early this morning, lumbering along like the big fat pig that she is." A pig, I should explain, is a food animal of Earth; a fat and ill-looking creature of low intelligence. "The old *Ertak* went by her as though she were standing still. She'll be a week and more arriving at Arpan. Look; you can just barely make her out on the charts."

I glanced down at the twin charts Correy had indicated. In the center of each the red spark that represented the *Ertak* glowed like a coal of fire; all around were the green pinpricks of light that showed the position of other bodies around us. The *Kabir*, while comparatively close, was just barely visible, her bulk was so small that it only faintly activated the super-radio reflex plates upon the ship's hull.

"We're showing her a pretty pair of heels," I nodded, studying our position in both dimensions. "Arpan isn't registering yet, I see. Who's this over here; Hydrot?"

"Right, sir," replied Correy. "Most useless world in the Universe, I guess. No good even for an emergency base."

"She's not very valuable, certainly," I admitted. "Just a ball of water whirling through space. But she does serve one good purpose; she's a sign-post it's impossible to mistake." Idly, I picked up Hydrot in the television disk, gradually increasing the size of the image until I had her full in the field, at maximum magnification.

HYDROT was a sizable sphere, somewhat larger than Earth—my natural standard of comparison—and utterly devoid of visible land. She was, as I had said, just a ball of water, swinging along uselessly through space, although no doubt there was land of some kind under that vast, unending stretch of gray water, for various observers had reported, in times past, bursts of volcanic steam issuing from the water.

Indeed, as I looked, I saw one such jet of steam, shooting into space from a spot not far from the equator of the strange world. In the television disk, it looked like a tiny wisp of white, barely visible against the gray water, but in reality it must have been a mighty roaring column of smoke and steam and erupted material.

"There's life in the old girl, anyway," I commented, indicating the image in the disk. "See her spout?"

We bent over the disk together, watching the white feather of steam.

"First time I've ever seen that," said Correy. "I know volcanic activity has been reported before, but—look, sir! There's another—two more!"

Undoubtedly, things were happening deep in the bowels of Hydrot. There were now three wisps of steam rising from the water, two of them fairly close together, the other a considerable distance away, arranged to form a very long pointed triangle, the short base of which ran close to the equator, its longer sides reaching toward one of the poles, the north pole, as we happened to view the image.

The columns of steam seemed to increase in size. Certainly they mounted higher into the air. I could imagine the terrific roar of them as they blasted their way through the molten water and hurled it in steaming spray around their bases, while huge stones fell hissing into the water on all sides. The eruption must have shaken the entire sphere; the gushing of those vomiting throats was a cataclysm of such magnitude that I could not guess its effect.

CORREY and I watched tensely, hardly breathing. I think we both felt that something was about to happen; a pent-up force had been released, and it was raging. We could almost hear the rumble of the volcanic explosions and the ear-splitting hiss of the escaping steam.

Suddenly Correy clutched my arm.

"Look!" he whispered. "*Look!*"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. I could see the water crawling inside the triangle formed by the three wisps of steam, crawling in white, foaming waves like tiny strands of thread as it rushed headlong, in mighty tidal waves, away from the center of that triangle.

The columns of steam flared up with fresh strength, darkening as though with smoke. Here and there within the triangle black specks appeared, grew larger, and ran together in crooked lines that widened continually.

"A—a new continent, sir!" said Correy almost reverently. "We've seen a new continent born."

Correy had put my thoughts into words. We had seen a new continent born. On the gray surface of Hydrot there was now a great irregular black blotch from which mounted three waving pillars of smoke and steam. Around the shores of the new continent the waters raged, white and angry, and little threads of white crawled outward from those shores—the crests of tidal waves that must have towered into the air twice the *Ertak's* length.

Slowly, the shore-line changed form as fresh portions arose, and others, newly-risen, sank again beneath the gray water. The wisps of steam darkened still more, and seemed to shrivel up, as though the fires that fed them had been exhausted by the travail of a new continent.

"Think, sir," breathed Correy, "what we might find if we landed there on that new continent, still dripping with the water from which it sprang! A part of the ocean's bed, thrust above the surface to be examined at will— Couldn't we leave our course long enough to—to look her over?"

I CONFESS I was tempted. Young John Hanson, Commander of the Special Patrol ship *Ertak*, had his good share of natural curiosity, the spirit of adventure and the explorer's urge. But at the same time, the Service has a discipline that is as rigid and relentless as the passing of time itself.

Hydrot lay off to starboard of our course. Arpan, where we were to refit, was ahead and to port, and we were already swinging in that direction. The *Ertak* was working on a

close schedule that gave us no latitude

"I'm afraid it can't be done, Mr. Correy," I said, shaking my head. "We'll report it immediately, of course, and perhaps we'll get orders to make an investigation. In that case—"

"Not the *Ertak!*" interrupted Correy passionately. "They'll send a crew of bug-eyed scientists there, and a score or so of laboratory men to analyze this, and run a test on that, and the whole mess of them will write millions of words apiece about the expedition that nobody will ever read. I know."

"Well, we'll hope you're wrong," I said, knowing in my heart that he was perfectly right. "Keep her on her present course, Mr. Correy."

"Present course, it is, sir!" snapped Correy. Then we bent together over the old-fashioned hooded television disk staring down silently and regretfully at the continent we had seen born, and which, with all its promise of interest and adventure, we must leave behind, in favor of a routine stop at the sub-base on Arpan.

I think both of us would have gladly given years of our lives to turn the *Ertak's* blunt nose toward Hydrot, but we had our orders, and in the Service as it was in those days, an officer did not question his orders.

CORREY mooned around the Arpan sub-base like a fractious child. Kincaide and I endeavored to cheer him up, and Hendricks, the *Ertak's* young third officer, tried in vain to induce Correy to take in the sights.

"All I want to know," Correy insisted, "is whether there's any change in orders. You got the news through to Base, didn't you, sir?"

"Right. All that came back was the usual 'Confirmed.' No comment." Correy muttered under his breath and wandered off to glare at the Arpanians who were working on the *Ertak*. Kincaide shrugged and shook his head.

"He's spoiling for action, sir," he commented. Kincaide was my second officer; a cool-headed, quick-witted fighting man, and as fine an officer as ever wore the blue-and-silver uniform of the Service. "I only hope—message for you, sir." He indicated an Arpanian orderly who had come up from behind, and was standing at attention.

"You're wanted immediately in the radio room, sir," said the orderly, saluting.

"Very well," I nodded, returning the salute and glancing at Kincaide. "Perhaps we will get a change in orders after all."

I hurried after the orderly, following him down the broad corridors of the administration building to the radio room. The commander of the Arpan sub-base was waiting there, talking gravely with the operator.

"Bad news, Commander," he said, as I entered the room. "We've just received a report from the passenger liner *Kabit*, and she's in desperate straits. At the insistence of the passengers, the ship made contact with Hydrot and is unable to leave. She has been attacked by some strange monster, or several of them—the message is badly confused. I thought perhaps you'd like to report the matter to Base yourself."

"Yes. Thank you, sir. Operator, please raise Base immediately!"

THE *Kabit?* That was the big liner we had spoken to the day before Correy and I had seen the new continent rise above the boundless waters of Hydrot. I knew the ship; she carried about eighteen hundred passengers, and a crew of seventy-five men and officers. Beside her, the *Ertak* was a pygmy; that the larger ship, so large and powerful, could be in trouble, seemed impossible. Yet—

"Base, sir," said the operator, holding a radio-menore toward me.

I placed the instrument on my head.

"John Hanson, Commander of the Special Patrol ship *Errak* emanating. Special report for Chief of Command."

"Report, Commander Hanson," emanated the Base operator automatically.

"Word has just been received at Arpan sub-base that passenger liner *Kabir* made contact with Hydrot, landing somewhere on the new continent, previously reported by the *Errak*. Liner *Kabir* reports itself in serious difficulties, exact nature undetermined, but apparently due to hostile activity from without. Will await instructions."

"Confirmed. Commander Hanson's report will be put through to Chief of Command immediately. Stand by."

I removed the radio-menore, motioning to the operator to resume his watch.

Radio communication in those days was in its infancy. Several persons who have been good enough to comment upon my previous chronicles of the Special Patrol Service, have asked "But, Commander Hanson! Why didn't you just radio for assistance?" forgetting as young persons do, that things have not always been as they are to-day.

The *Errak's* sending apparatus, for example, could reach out at best no more than a day's journey in any direction, and then only imperfectly. Transmission of thought by radio instead of symbols or words, had been introduced but a few years before I entered the Service. It must be remembered that I am an old, old man, writing of things that happened before most of the present population of the Universe was born—that I am writing of men who, for the larger part, have long since embarked upon the Greatest Adventure.

"BASE, sir," said the operator after a moment, and I hastily slipped on the radio-menore.

"Commander John Hanson, standing by," I shot at the operator at Base. "Have you orders?"

"Orders for Captain John Hanson, Commander of the Special Patrol ship *Errak*," emanated the operator in a sort of mental drone. "Chief of Command directs that the *Errak* proceed immediately to the scene of the reported difficulty, and take any necessary steps to relieve same. I will repeat the orders," and he droned through them a second time.

"Orders are understood. The results of our operations will be reported to Base as soon as possible." I tore off the radio-menore and hurried from the room, explaining to the sub-base commander as I went.

Correy was standing beside the *Errak*, talking to Kincaide, and as I approached, they both looked around quickly and hopefully.

"What's up, sir?" asked Correy, reading news in my face. "A change in orders?"

"Correct! That big liner, the *Kabir*, landed on Hydrot, and she's in some sort of mysterious trouble. Orders from the Chief himself are to proceed there immediately. Are any men away from the ship on leave?"

"If there are, we can do without them!" shouted Correy. "I'll stand a double watch."

"The crew is on duty, sir," said Kincaide quietly. "Mr. Hendricks is aboard directing the taking on of supplies. We can leave any time you order, sir."

"We leave immediately, gentlemen," I said. "Mr. Correy, will you give the necessary orders?"

"Yes, sir!" grinned Correy, his eyes dancing like a schoolboy's. He was in the navigating room jabbing attention signals and snapping orders into the microphone before Kincaide and I, moving more leisurely, had entered the ship.

HURTLING through space at maximum speed, it took us two days, Earth time, to come close enough to Hydrot so that we could locate the unfortunate *Kabit*. She had landed on a level plain near the shore of the new continent, where she lay, just a tiny bright speck, even under the maximum power of our television disk.

"It's an odd thing, sir, that we can't raise her by radio," commented Hendricks, who was on duty. "Have we tried recently?"

"We've been trying constantly, at intervals of but a few minutes," I replied grimly. "Several times, the operator reports, he has been able to get a muffled and garbled response, utterly unintelligible. He says that the signals sound as though the radio emanation-plates in her outer hull were damaged or grounded. We'll just have to wait until we get there."

"As soon as we are near enough, please make an analysis of her atmosphere, so that we can break out masks, if necessary." Hendricks, while young and rather too impulsive, was a good rough-and-ready scientist, as well as a courageous and dependable officer. "When Mr. Correy relieves you, please inform him that I am taking a watch below, should he need me." Hydrot was looming up in the television disk, and I wished to be rested and ready for action when we landed.

I WAS awakened by an uncomfortable warmth, and when I glanced at my watch the explanation was obvious. We had penetrated the outer gaseous envelope of the world that had so recently given birth to a continent, and Correy was driving the *Ertak* through at reckless speed.

When I entered the navigating room, Correy glanced up guiltily at the surface-temperature gauge and then hastily saluted.

"We're reducing speed, sir," he said. "Atmosphere is rather denser than I had expected. Hendricks reports the air breathable, with a humidity of one hundred. And—tell me, sir, what do you make of the appearance of the *Kabit* now?"

I bent over the hooded television disk anxiously. The *Kabit* was in the center of the field, and the image was perhaps a third of the disk's diameter in length.

Instead of a tiny bright speck, I could see now the fat bulk of the ship, its bright metal gleaming—but across or around the ship, were broad spiral bands of black or dark green, as sharp as though they had been painted there.

"What are the bands, Mr. Correy?" I asked sharply. "Have you formed any opinion?"

"I have, sir, but I'd rather not offer it at this time," said my first officer gravely. "Look about the ship, in the immediate vicinity, and see if you find anything of interest. My eyes may be playing me tricks."

I glanced curiously at Correy, and then bent my attention on the image in the disk.

IT was impossible to make out any details of the background, save that the country round seemed to be fairly level, with great pools of gray water standing here and there, and a litter, as of gigantic, wilted vegetation, spread over everything.

And then, as I looked, it seemed to me that the *Kabit* shifted position slightly. At the same time, the spiral bands seemed to move, and upon the ground around the ship, there was movement also.

I looked up from the disk, feeling Correy's eyes upon me. We stared at each other, neither wishing to speak—hardly daring to speak. There are some things too monstrous to put into words.

"You—you saw it, sir?" asked Correy at last, his voice scarcely more than a whisper.

"I don't know. I think I saw some-

thing like a—a snake. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. Something like a snake. A snake that has wrapped itself around the *Kabir*, holding it helpless . . . a serpent. . . ." He gestured helplessly, a sort of horror in his eyes. I think he had convinced himself he had only imagined the serpent, until I had seen the same thing.

"Have you stopped to think, Mr. Correy," I asked slowly, "how long the creature would have to be to wrap itself like that around a liner the size of the *Kabir?* It—it can't be!"

"I know it, sir," nodded Correy. "I know it. And still, I saw it, and you saw it."

"Yes," I muttered, "I saw it. I—I saw it *move!*"

WE maintained a speed that kept the surface-temperature gauge dangerously close to maximum permissible reading, and despite the forced ventilation of the ship, we were dripping with perspiration.

Atmospheric speeds are maddeningly low after the reckless, hurtling speed of space travel, but our vaunted scientists haven't yet found a way of eliminating friction, and we had to make the best of it.

With maddening slowness the image in the television disk grew larger and clearer, relentlessly confirming our original conclusion.

The *Kabir* was wrapped in the coils of a mighty serpent; a monster that must have been the height of a man in diameter, and whose length I could not even guess.

Four coils were looped tightly about the *Kabir*, and we could now see the terrible tail of the thing, and its head.

I have always been glad that the details of that ghastly head became visible gradually, viewed suddenly, in full relief, it was a sight that might well have threatened the reason of any man.

The serpent's mouth was lined with a triple row of long, fang-like teeth, tilted gullet-ward at a sharp angle, and the breathing holes were elevated to form warty excrudescences near the end of the snoutish upper jaw. Long colorless tentacles fringed the horrible mouth; barbels that writhed incessantly, as though they sought food for the rapacious jaws they guarded. From a point slightly above and to the rear of the tiny, ruby eyes, two slim and graceful antennae, iridescent and incongruously beautiful, rose twice the height of a man. Like the antennae of a butterfly, they were surmounted by tiny knobs, and were in constant motion

THE whole head was armored with great plates or scales, dark green in color, and apparently of tremendous thickness. A short distance behind the head were two tremendous reddish-brown fins, with strong supporting spines that seemed to terminate in retractile claws. In the water, these fins would undoubtedly be of tremendous value in swimming and in fighting, but on land they seemed rather useless. Aside from a rudimentary dorsal fin, a series of black, stubby spines, connected by a barely visible webbing, the thing had no other external evidences of its marine origin.

"You've been restless for action, Mr. Correy," I commented grimly. "I believe this chap will give us all you could desire."

Correy, still staring down into the disk, fascinated by the terrible details there, shook his head.

"It shouldn't be such a stiff battle, sir," he said. "The ray will make quick work of him, once we're within distance."

"Yes—and of the *Kabir* and all on board," I reminded him. "If he has the strength his size would indicate, he would crush the liner in his death agonies, or, failing that, would heave

it about so violently that those within would be maimed or killed outright. This is a case for cunning, and not might."

"I think, sir, both cunning and might will be needed," said Correy soberly, looking up from the disk. "Cunning alone will not dispose of that lad. Have you any plans?"

"Rough plans only; we'll have to develop them as we go along. We don't know what we'll be up against. We'll land a safe distance away, and a small expeditionary force will attack as it sees fit; probably dividing itself into two or three units. The *Ertak* will be manned by a skeleton crew and ready to take any necessary action to protect itself or, if possible, to aid any of the expeditionary parties."

"WHAT weapons, sir?" asked Correy, his eyes gleaming. "I'll give the orders now!"

"It's too soon for that; it'll be an hour at least before we land. But I believe every man, including officers, should be armed with pistols, at least six atomic bombs, and there should be a field disintegrator-ray unit for each party. And each member must be equipped with a menore; communication will be by menore only. You might call Mr. Kincaide and Mr. Hendricks, and we'll hold a little council of war."

"Right, sir!" said Correy, and picked up the microphone. Kincaide and Hendricks were in the room almost within the minute.

We laid our plans as best we could, but they weren't very definite. Only a few things were certain.

Somehow, we must induce the monster to release his grasp on the *Kabit*. We could take no action against the serpent until the big liner and her passengers were safe. It was a desperate mission; an enterprise not of the *Ertak*, but of individuals.

"One thing is certain, sir," commented Correy, taking over by visual navigation, and reducing speed still more, "you must remain in charge of the ship. You will be needed—"

"I understand your motives, Mr. Correy," I interrupted, "but I do not agree with you. As Commander of the *Ertak*, I shall command the activities of her men. You will have charge of one landing force, and Mr. Hendricks of another. You, Mr. Kincaide, I shall ask to remain in charge of the ship."

"VERY well, sir," nodded Kincaide, swallowing his disappointment. I should have liked to have Kincaide with me, for he was level-headed and cool in an emergency—but it was because of these very things that I wanted him in charge of the *Ertak*.

"We're close enough now, sir, to select a landing place," put in Correy. "There's a likely spot, a safe distance away and apparently level, almost on the shore. Shall I set her down there?"

"Use your own judgment, Mr. Correy. You may order the landing force to arm and report at the exit port. As soon as you have made contact, you and Mr. Hendricks will report to me there.

"Mr. Kincaide, you will remain on duty here. I am leaving the conduct of the ship entirely to your judgment, asking you to remember only that the rescue of the *Kabit* and her nearly two thousand souls is the object of this expedition, and the safety of our own personnel cannot be given primary consideration."

"I understand, sir," nodded Kincaide gravely. He held out his hand in that familiar gesture of Earth, which may mean so much more than men ever dare put into words, and we shook hands silently.

There were to be three landing parties of five men and one officer each—eighteen men against a crea-

ture that held a mighty passenger liner in its coils!

"I wish, sir, that I were going in your place," said Kincaide softly.

"I know that. But—waiting here will be the hardest job of all. I'm leaving that for you." I turned and hurried out of the room, to make my entries in the log—perhaps my last entries—and secure my equipment.

THERE are times, in setting down these old tales of the Special Patrol Service as it was before they tacked a "Retired" after my name and title, that I wish I had been a bit more studious during my youth. I find myself in need of words, and possessed only of memories.

I wish I could think of words that would describe the sight that confronted us when we emerged from the *Ertak* and set foot upon the soil of that newly-born continent of Hydrot, but I find I cannot. I have tried many times, and I find my descriptions fall far short of the picture I still carry in my mind.

The ground was a vast littered floor of wilted marine growths, some already rotting away, while others, more hardy, or with roots reaching into as yet undried ooze, retained a sort of freshness. Crab-like creatures scuttled in all directions, apparently feasting upon the plentiful carrion. The stench was terrible, almost overpowering at first, but after a few minutes we became accustomed to it, and, in the intensity of the work we had undertaken, it was forgotten.

Progress was not possible on the ground. Sheltered from the sun by the thick growths it supported, it was still treacherously soft. But the giant marine vegetation that had retained something of its vigor provided a highway, difficult and dangerous and uncertain, but passable.

I remained with the party taking the most direct route to the unfortunate *Kabit*, while Correy and Hendricks led the parties to my left and right, respectively. We kept in constant touch with each other by means of our menores.

"I believe," emanated Correy, "that the beast sees us. I had a good view of him a few seconds back, and his head was elevated and pointed this way."

"IT'S possible," I replied. "Be careful, however, to do nothing to alarm or excite him. All men must keep under cover, and proceed with as little noise and commotion as possible. I'm going to see, now, if I can get in touch with anyone on the *Kabit;* with full power, communication might be possible even through the *Kabit's* grounded hull."

"It's worth trying," agreed Hendricks. "These new menores are powerful."

I adjusted the little atomic generator to maximum, and replaced the instrument on my head.

"On board the *Kabit!*" I emanated, trying by sheer mental effort to drive the thought over that stinking waste, and through the massive double hull of the liner. "Ahoy the *Kabit!*"

"This is Captain Gole," flashed back the answer instantly. "Captain Gole of the passenger liner *Kabit*. You are from the *Ertak?*"

"Commander Hanson of the *Ertak* emanating. How are conditions on the *Kabit?*"

"Ghastly!" I could sense the feeling in the word, faintly as it smote upon my consciousness. "My officers are keeping the crew under some sort of control, but the passengers are unmanageable. They are frantic—insane with terror. Two or three have already gone mad. I am on the verge of insanity myself. Have you seen the thing that has us trapped?"

"Yes. We are coming to your aid. Tell your passengers to calm themselves. We'll find a way out of this somehow. You know the motto of our Service."

"Yes: *'Nothing Less Than Complete Success!'* I have already issued a bulletin to the effect that I am in contact with your ship. I think it has had a good effect. The clamor is quieting somewhat, you don't know what a terrible strain this has been, sir!"

I COULD well imagine his mental state. The captain of the *Kabit* was a Zenian, and the Zenians are too high-strung to stand up under a severe strain.

"It may help us if you'll tell us, very briefly, the history of your experience here," I suggested. "We're going up against something we know nothing about. Perhaps you can give us some valuable information."

"I doubt it, for there's very little to tell. Undoubtedly, you have the report which I managed to get through to Arpan before our radio emanation plates were put out of commission.

"Against my better judgment, we set down here upon the insistence of the passengers. The television instruments revealed nothing more dangerous than the small life in the marine growths left stranded by the receding water.

"I unsealed one of the exit ports, and a small party of the more curious passengers, under the escort of my second officer and six men, ventured forth on a little tour of exploration. A goodly portion of the remaining passengers huddled close to the ship, contenting themselves with souvenir-hunting close by.

"Suddenly there was a great sound of shouting from the exploring party. Not knowing the danger, but realizing that something was wrong, the passengers rushed into the ship. Helplessly, for we are utterly defenseless, I watched the fleeing party of explorers.

"For a moment, I could not see why they fled; I could only see them scrambling desperately toward the ship, and casting frightened glances behind them. Then I saw the thing's head rear itself from the slimy tangle of vegetation, and behind it the wilting growths were lashed to shreds.

"The head drove forward. My second officer, courageously bringing up the rear, was the first victim. Perhaps his bright uniform attracted the beast's attention. I don't know.

"THEY were close now; very close. I knew that we were in danger, and yet I could not bear to seal the port in the faces of those helpless men racing towards the ship.

"I waited. Twice more the terrible head shot out and both times a man was picked from the fleeing ranks. It was terrible—ghastly.

"The rest of them reached the ship, and as the last man came reeling through the port, the door swung shut and began spinning upon its threads. Almost instantly I gave the order for vertical ascent at emergency speed, but before the order could be obeyed, the ship lurched suddenly, rolled half over, and swung back with a jolt. As the power was applied, the ship rose at a crazy angle, hung there trembling for a moment, and then sank back to the ground. The load was too great. I knew then that we were in the power of the thing that had come wriggling out of that sea of rotting weeds.

"I got the message off to Arpan before our radio emanation plates were grounded or destroyed by the coils of the monster. At intervals, I have tried to pull away, but each time the thing tightens its coils angrily, until the fabric of the ship groans under the strain. We have heard you calling us, faintly and faultily. I have been waiting for you to reach me with the menore. You have come at last, and I am at your orders. If you cannot help us, we are lost, for we shall all go mad."

"We'll have you in the clear very soon," I assured him with a confidence I did not feel. "Stand by for further communications, and—are your generators working?"

"Yes. They're in perfect order. If only the beast would uncoil himself—"

"We'll see to that very shortly. Stand by."

I REDUCED power and asked Correy and Hendricks if they had both followed the conversation. They had, and had now reduced power, as I had done. We all realized that our counsels might not be reassuring to Captain Gole.

"As I see it, gentlemen, the first thing we must do is to induce the beast to leave the *Kabit*. And the only way that can be accomplished is by—bait."

"Exactly!" snapped Correy. "He's hungry. He knows there's food in the *Kabit*. If we can get him to leave the liner and come after us, the problem's solved."

"But he can run faster than we. I can hardly crawl over this slimy [illegible]" objected Hendricks. "I'm ready to try everything, but remember that we've got to lead him away far enough to make him release the *K*[illegible]

"I've got it!" emanated Correy suddenly, his enthusiasm making the vibrations from the menore fairly hammer into my brain. "I'll cut a long narrow swath with one of the portable disintegrator rays; long enough to take him far away from the *Kabit*, and just wide enough to pass a man. I'll run along this deep groove, just below the reach of the monster. I can make good time; the serpent'll have to slash and wriggle his way over or through this slimy growth. How's that for an idea?"

It was daring enough to have some hope of success, but its dangers were obvious.

"What happens when you reach the end of the path the ray cuts?" I asked grimly.

"You and Hendricks, with your men, will be on both sides of the path, not opposite each other. When he passes, you'll let go your disintegrator rays and the atomic bombs. He'll be in a dozen pieces before we reach the end of the path."

SPREAD out here before me, in all its wordy detail, it would seem that a long time must have elapsed while Captain Gole related his story, and my officers and myself laid our plans. As a matter of fact, communicating as we were by menore, it was only a minute or so since Correy had emanated his first comment. "I believe the beast sees us. His head was elevated and pointed this way."

And now Hendricks, who was peering over the ruffled edge of an undulating, rubbery leaf of seaweed, turned and waved both arms. Disobeying my strictest orders, he fairly screamed his frantic warning.

"He sees us! He sees us! He's coming!"

I ran up the twisted, concave surface of a giant stem of some kind. To my left, I could hear the shrill whine of Correy's disintegrator ray generator, already in action, and protesting against a maximum load. To the right, Hendricks and his men were scrambling into position. Before me was the enemy.

Slowly, deliberately, as though he did not doubt his terrible ability, he unwrapped his coils from the *Kabit*. His head, with its graceful antennae searching the air, and the tentacles around his mouth writhing hungrily, reared itself ten times a man's height from the ground. His small red eyes flashed like precious stones. Beyond, the mighty greenish coils slashed the rotting weed as he unwrapped them from the *Kabit*.

I snatched off my menore and adjusted it again for maximum power.

"Captain Gole!"

"Yes. What's happening? Tell me! We're rolling and pitching."

"In a moment you'll be free. When I signal 'Rise!' ascend as quickly as possible to a safe distance. Stand by!"

"Hendricks! Be ready to follow Correy's plan. It's our only chance. In a second, now—"

The last coil moved, slipped from the blunt nose of the liner.

"Rise!" I ordered. "*Rise!*"

I saw the ship rock suddenly, and roar hollowly toward the sky. I felt the rush of wind made by her passing.

Then, head still elevated and swaying, the two great reddish-brown fins fanning the air like grotesque wings, the serpent lashed out towards us, coming at amazing speed.

CORREY, sure that he was observed by the serpent, leaped down from the huge leaf upon which he had been standing. Hendricks and I, followed by our men, scrambled desperately toward the deep path or lane that Correy's ray had cut through the tangled, stinking growth. Correy's plan had given some promise of success, had we had time to put it into proper operation. As it was, neither Hendricks or I had had time to get into position.

Hendricks, on my right, was working his way as rapidly as possible toward the path, but he had a long way to go. Unless a miracle happened, he would be too late to help. The portable ray machines would be helpless against such a mighty bulk, except at close range.

I reached the path and glanced hastily to the right, the direction from which the great serpent was sweeping down on us. He was less than the *Ertak's* length away.

"Hide, men!" I ordered. "Under the vegetation—in the muck—anywhere!" I glanced down the lane to the left, and saw, to my relief, that Correy and his men were a goodly distance away, and still far from the end of the swath their ray had cut for them. Then, with the monster towering almost over my head, I darted behind a spongy, spotted growth, listening, above the pounding of my heart, to the rapid slithering of the serpent's ponderous body.

Of a sudden the sound stopped. I was conscious of an excited warning from Hendricks: "He's stopped, sir! *Run!* He's seen you . . . he—"

Startled, I glanced up—directly into the hideous face of the snake.

IT seemed to me he was grinning. His mouth was partially open, and the pale, writhing barbels that surrounded his mouth seemed to reach out toward me. The long and graceful antennae were bent downward inquiringly, quivering tensely, and his small eyes glowed like wind-fanned coals of fire. The brownish fins were rigid as metal, the retractile claws unsheathed and cruelly curved. He was so close that I could hear the air rushing through his crater-like breathing holes.

For an instant we stared at each other; he with confident gloating, myself, too startled and horrified to move. Then, as his head shot downward, I leaped aside.

The scaly head raked the clothes from one side of my body, and sent me, sprawling and breathless, into the welter of sagging weeds.

I heard the sharp whine of my ray generator going into action, but I took no chances on the accuracy of my men. They were working under tremendous difficulties. As I fell, I snatched an atomic bomb from my belt, and, as the horrid head drew back to strike again, I threw the bomb with all my strength.

I had thrown from an exceedingly awkward position, and the bomb exploded harmlessly some distance away, showering us with muck and slimy vegetation.

Evidently, however, the explosion startled the serpent, for his head slewed around nervously, and I felt the ground tremble under me as his mighty coils lashed the ground in anger. Scrambling to my feet, I seized the projector tube of the disintegrator ray and swept the beam upward until it beat upon that terrible head.

THE thing screamed—a high, thin sound almost past the range of audibility. Reddish dust sifted down around me—the heavy dust of disintegration. In the distance, I could hear the slashing of the tail as it tore through the rubbery growth of weeds.

With half his head eroded by the ray, the serpent struck again, but this time his aim was wild. The mighty head half buried itself in the muck beside me, and I swung the projector tube down so that the full force of the ray tore into the region above and behind the eyes, where I imagined the brain to be. The heavy reddish dust fairly pelted from the ugly head.

Correy had come running back. Dimly, I could hear him shouting.

"Look out!" I warned him. "Keep back, Correy! Keep the men back! I've got him, but he'll die hard—"

As though to prove my words true, the head, a ghastly thing eroded into a shapeless mass, was jerked from the mud, and two tremendous loops of tortured body came hurtling over my head. One of the huge fins swung by like a sail, its hooked talons ripping one of Correy's men into bloody shreds. Correy himself, caught in a desperate endeavor to save the unfortunate man, was knocked twenty feet. For one terrible instant, I thought the beast had killed Correy also.

Gasping, Correy rose to his feet, and I ran to assist him.

"Back, men!" I shouted. "Hendricks! Get away as far and as fast as you can. Back! *Back!*" Half dragging Correy, who was still breathless from the blow, I hurried after the men.

Behind us, shaking the earth in his death agonies, the monstrous serpent beat the plain about him into a veritable sea of slime.

FROM a point of vantage, atop the *Errak*, we watched for the end.

"I have never," said Correy in an awed voice, "seen anything take so long to die."

"You have never before," I commented grimly, "seen a snake so large. It took ages to grow that mighty body; it is but natural that, even with the brain disintegrated into dust, the body would not die immediately."

"Undoubtedly he has a highly decentralized nervous system," nodded Hendricks, who was, as I have said, something of a practical scientific man, although no laboratory worker or sniveling scientist. "And instinct is directing him back toward the sea from which, all unwillingly, he came. Look—he's almost in the water."

"I don't care where he goes," said Correy savagely, "so he goes there as carrion. Clark was a good man, sir." Clark was the man the serpent had killed.

"True," I said. Making the entry of that loss would hurt; even though the discipline of the Service is—or at least, used to be—very rigid, officers get rather close to their men during the course of many tours of duty in the confines of a little ship like the *Errak*. "But the *Kabir*, with her nearly two thousand souls, is safe."

We all looked up. The *Kabir* was no longer visible. Battered, but still space-worthy, she had gone on her way.

"I suppose," grinned Correy, "that we'll be thanked by radio." The grin

was real; Correy had had action enough to make him happy for a time. The nervous tension was gone.

"Probably. But—watch our friend! He's in the water at last. I imagine that's the last we'll see of him."

HALF of the tremendous body was already in the water, lashing it into white foam. The rest of the great length slid, twitching, down the shore. The water boiled and seethed; dark loops flipped above the surface and disappeared. And then, as though the giant serpent had found peace at last, the waters subsided, and only the wreaths of white foam upon the surface showed where he had sunk to the ooze that had given him birth.

"Pinnah," I commented. "All that's left is for the scientists to flock here to admire his bones. They'll probably condemn us for ruining his skull. It took them a good many thousand years to find the remains of a sea-serpent on Earth, you remember."

"Some time in the Twenty-second Century, wasn't it, sir?" asked Hendricks. "I think my memory serves me well."

"I wouldn't swear to it. I know that sailors reported them for ages, but that wouldn't do for the laboratory men and the scientists. They had to have the bones right before them, subject to tests and measurements."

That's the trouble with the scientists, I've found. Their ability to believe is atrophied. They can't see beyond their laboratory tables.

Of course, I'm just an old man, and perhaps I'm bitter with the drying sap of age. That's what I've been told. "Old John Hanson," they call me, and smile as if to say that explains everything.

Old? Of course I'm old! But the years behind me are not empty years. I didn't spend them bending over little instruments, or compiling rows of figures.

And I was right about the scientists—they did put in a protest concerning our thoughtlessness in ruining the head of the serpent. They could only estimate the capacity of the brain-pan, argue about the cephalic index, and guess at the frontal angle; it was a terrible blow to science.

Bitter old John Hanson!

ASTOUNDING STORIES

For Science Fiction

STRANGE TALES

For Weird Fiction



Professor Wentworth swung his cannon ray upon that advancing horde.

Spawn of the Comet

By H. Thompson Rich

Tokyo, June 10 (AP)—A number of the meteors that pelted Japan last night, as the earth passed through the tail of the Mystery Comet have been found and are puzzling astronomers everywhere.

About the size of baseballs, orange in color, they appear to be of some unknown metal. So far, due to their extreme hardness, all attempts to analyze them have failed.

Their uniformity of size and marking gives rise to the popular belief that they are seeds, and, fantastic though this con-

A swarm of huge, fiery nuts, brood of a mystery comet, burst from their shells to threaten the unsuspecting world.

ception is, it finds support in certain scientific quarters here.

JIM CARTER read the news dispatch thoughtfully and handed it back to his chief without comment.

"Well, what do you make of it?"

Miles Overton, city editor of *The New York Press*, shoved his green eye-shade far back on his bald head and glanced up irritably from his littered desk.

"I don't know," said Jim.

"You don't know!" Overton snorted, biting his dead cigar impatiently. "And I suppose you don't know they're finding the damn things right here in New York, not to mention Chicago, London, Rio and a few other places," he added.

"Yes, I know about New York. It's a regular egg hunt."

"Egg hunt is right! But why tell me all this now? I didn't see any mention of 'em in your report of last night's proceedings. Did you see any?"

"No, but I saw a lot of shooting stars!" said Jim, recalling that weird experience he and the rest of humanity had passed through so recently.

"Yeah, I'll say!" Overton lit his wrecked cigar and dragged on it soothingly. "Now then, getting back to cases—what are these damn things, anyway? That's what I'd like to know."

"So would I," said Jim. "Maybe they *are* seeds?"

Overton frowned. He was a solid man, not given to fancies. He had a paper to get out every day and that taxed his imagination to the limit. There was no gray matter left for any such idle musings as Jim suggested. What he wanted was facts, and he wanted them right away.

"Eggs will do!" he said. "Go out and get one—and find out what's inside it."

"Okay, Chief," said Jim, but he knew it was a large order. "I'll have one on your desk for breakfast!"

Then, with a grave face that denied his light words, he stepped from the city room on that fantastic assignment.

IT was the television broadcast hour and crowds thronged the upper level of Radio Plaza, gazing intently at the bulletin screen, as Jim Carter emerged from the *Press* tower.

News from the ends of the earth, in audio-picture form, flashed before their view; but only the reports on the strange meteors from the tail of 1947, IV—so designated by astronomers because it was the fourth comet discovered that year—held their interest. Nothing since the great Antarctic gold rush of '38 had so gripped the public as the dramatic arrival and startling behavior of this mysterious visitant from outer space.

Jim paused a moment, halfway across the Plaza, to take a look at the screen himself.

The substance of the Tokyo dispatch, supplemented by pictures of Japanese scientists working over the baffling orange spheres, had just gone off. Now came a flash from Berlin, in which a celebrated German chemist was seen directing an effort to cut into one of them with an acid drill. It failed and the scientist turned to declare to the world that the substance seemed more like crystal than metal and was harder than diamond.

Jim tarried no longer. He knew where he was going. It was still early and Joan would be up—Joan Wentworth, daughter of Professor Stephen Wentworth, who held the chair of astro-ithology at Hartford University. It was as their guest at the observatory last night that he had seen 1947, IV at close range.

as the earth passed through her golden train with that awesome, unparalleled display of fireworks.

Now he'd have the pleasure of seeing Joan again, and at the same time get the low-down from her father on those confounded seeds—or eggs, rather. If anyone could crack one of them, he'd bet Professor Wentworth could.

So, hastening toward the base of Plaza Airport, he took an elevator to ramp-level 118, where his autoplane was parked, and five minutes later was winging his way to Hartford.

THROTTLE wide, Jim did the eighty miles to the Connecticut capital in a quarter of an hour.

Then, banking down through the warm June night onto the University landing field, he retracted the wings of his swift little bus and motored to the foot of Observatory Hill.

Parking outside the Wentworth home, he mounted the steps and rang the bell.

It was answered by a slim, appealing girl of perhaps twenty-two. Her was a wistful, oval face, with a small, upturned nose; and her clear hazel eyes were the sort that always seem to be enjoying some amusing secret of their own. Her hair was a soft brown, worn loose to the shoulders, after the style then in vogue.

"Joan!" blurted Jim.

"What brings you here at such an hour, Jimmy Carter?" she asked with mock severity.

"You!"

"I don't believe you."

"What then have I come for?"

"You've come to interview father about those meteorites."

"Nonsense! That's purely incidental—a mere by-product, you might say."

"Yes, you might—but I wouldn't advise you to say it to father."

"All right, I won't," he promised, as she led him into the library.

Professor Wentworth rose as they entered and laid aside some scientific book he had been reading.

A man of medium height and build, he had the same twinkling hazel eyes as his daughter, though somewhat dimmed from peering at too many stars for too many years.

"Good evening, Jim," he said. "I've rather been expecting you. What is on your mind?"

"Seeds! Eggs! Baseballs!" was the reply. "I don't know what. You've seen the latest television reports, I suppose?" said Jim, noting that the panel on the receiving cabinet across the room was still lit.

"I've seen some of them. Joan has been keeping an eye on the screen mostly, however, while I refreshed my mind on the known chemistry of meteorites. You see, I have a few of those eggs myself, up at the observatory."

"You have?" cried Jim.

He was certainly on the right track!

"Yes. One of my assistants brought them in this afternoon. Would you like to see them?"

"I'll say I would!"

"I rather thought you might," the professor smiled. "Come along, then."

And as Jim turned, he shot a look at Joan, and added:

"You may come too, my dear, if you want."

THEY went out and up the hill to where the great white dome glistened under the stars, and once inside, Jim Carter of *The New York Press* was privileged to see two of those strange objects that had turned the world topsy-turvy.

As the Tokyo dispatch and the Berlin television flash had indicated, they were orange in color, about the size of baseballs.

"Weird looking eggs, all right!" said Jim. "What are they made of, anyway?"

"Some element unknown on earth," replied Professor Wentworth.

"But I thought there were only ninety-two elements in the universe and we'd discovered them all."

"So we have. But don't forget this. We are still trying to split the atom, which nature has done many times and will doubtless do many times again. It is merely a matter of altering the valence of the atoms in an old element; whereupon it shifts its position in the periodic scale and becomes a new element. Nature accomplishes this alchemy by means of great heat, which is certainly to be found in a meteor."

"Particularly when it hits the earth's atmosphere!"

"Yes. And now then, I'd like to have you examine more closely this pair I have here."

Jim lifted one and noted its peculiar smoothness, its remarkable weight for its size; he noted, too, that it was veined with concentric markings, like a series of arabesques or fleurs-de-lis.

The professor lifted the other, calling attention to the fact that the size and marking of both were identical, as hitherto reported.

"Also, you'll observe that they are slightly warm. In fact, they are appreciably warmer than when they were first brought in. Curious behavior, this, for new-laid cometary eggs! More like seeds germinating than meteorites cooling, wouldn't you say?"

"But good Lord!" Jim was somewhat taken aback to hear this celebrated scientist apparently commit himself to that wild view. "You don't really think they're seeds, do you?"

"Why not?"

"But surely no seeds could survive the temperature they hit getting here."

"No seeds such as we know, true. But what, after all, do we know of the types of life to be found on other planets?"

"Nothing, of course. Only these didn't come from a planet. They came from a comet."

"And who can say a comet is not a disintegrated planet? Or suppose we take the other theory, that it is an eruption from some sun, ours or another. In any event, who can say no life can survive intense heat? Certainly these seeds—or call them meteorites, if you choose—came through the ordeal curiously unscathed."

"Yes, that's true. Funny, too!"

"And another thing is true, Jim. If by chance they *should* be seeds, and *should* germinate, the life they would produce would be something quite alien to our experience, possibly quite inimical to—"

Professor Wentworth broke off abruptly as a startled cry came from Joan, and, turning, they saw her standing with eyes fixed in fascinated horror on the laboratory table.

FOLLOWING her gaze, Jim saw something that caused his own eyes to bulge. The color of those mysterious orange spheres had suddenly, ominously heightened. They lay glowing there like balls of fire.

"Good God!" he gasped. "Look, Professor! Do you see that?"

Professor Wentworth did not answer but himself stood gazing spellbound at the astounding scene.

Even as they looked, the metal table smoldered under the fiery meteorites and melted, and in a little while the meteorites themselves sizzled from view. Flames licked up from the floor; dense, suffocating fumes rose and swirled through the laboratory.

"Quick!" cried Jim, seizing Joan's arm. "Come on, Professor! Never mind trying to save anything. Let's get out of here!"

They staggered from the laboratory and, once outside, plunged down the hill. It was none too soon.

Behind them, as they fled, came suddenly two deafening explosions. Looking back, they saw the roof of the observatory tilt crazily, saw the whole building shatter, and erupt like a volcano.

But that, startling though it was, was not all they saw. For now, as they stood there speechless, two incredible forms rose phoenix-like from the flames—two weird monsters, orange against the red, hideous, nightmarish. They saw them hover a moment above that fiery hell, then rise on batlike wings to swoop off into the night.

Nor was that all. As the awed trio stood there halfway down Observatory Hill, following the flight of that pair of demons, other explosions reached their ears, and, turning to the city below, they saw vivid jets of red leap up here and there, saw other orange wings against the night.

While off across the southeast sky, receding fast, spread the Mystery Comet whose tail had sowed the seeds of this strange life.

STILL silent, the trio stood gazing upon that appalling scene for some minutes, while the ruddy shadows of the flaming observatory lit their tense faces.

"Well, the seeds have hatched," said Professor Wentworth at length, in a strained voice. "I am afraid some of the curious who have been gathering those meteorites so eagerly have paid a dear price for them."

"Yes, I'm afraid so," echoed Jim. "We were lucky. If Joan hadn't happened to spot those things just when she did—" He broke off and pressed her hand fondly. "But somehow, I can't believe it, even yet. What do you think the things are, Professor?"

"God knows! As I told you, those seeds, should they germinate, would produce something quite alien to our experience, and, as I feared, it is a form of life that will not blend well with humanity."

Jim shuddered.

"But look, father!" exclaimed Joan. "They're flying away! They seem to be 'way up among the stars. Maybe they've left the earth altogether."

Professor Wentworth following his daughter's gaze, saw that many of the monsters were now mere orange pinpoints against the night.

"Let us hope so!" he said fervently.

But in his heart there was no conviction, nor in Jim's, strangely.

ON the way back to New York, Jim had plenty to heighten his uneasiness. The scene below him everywhere was red with conflagrations, the sky everywhere orange with the wings of those fiery moths.

More than one swept perilously close, as he pushed his auto-plane on at top speed; but they showed no inclination to attack, for which he was devoutly thankful.

Over the metropolitan area, the scene was one beggaring description. All the five boroughs were a blazing checker-board. New Jersey, Connecticut, Westchester—all were raging. Hundreds of those deadly bombs must have burst in Manhattan alone.

But the fire department there seemed to have the situation in hand, he noticed as he swept down onto the Plaza landing platform.

Leaving his plane with an attendant, he took the first elevator to the street level, and crossing

hastily to the *Press* tower, mounted to the city room.

There absolute pandemonium raged. Typewriters were sputtering, telegraph keys clicking, phones buzzing, reporters coming and going in a steady stream, mingled with the frantic orders of editors, sub-editors, copy readers, composing-room men and others.

Carter fought through the bedlam to the city editor's desk.

"Sorry I couldn't bring you that egg, Chief," he said, with a grim smile. "I had one right in my hand, but it hatched out on me."

Overton looked up wearily. He was a man who had seen a miracle, a godless miracle that restored his faith in the devil.

"Don't talk—just write!" he growled. "I've seen and heard too much to-night. We're all going to hell, I guess—unless we're already there."

But Jim wasn't ready to write yet.

"What's the dope elsewhere? The same?"

"All over the map! We're frying, from coast to coast."

"And abroad?"

"Cooked, everywhere!" He paused, and turned an imploring face to Jim. "Tell me, Carter—what's happening? You've seen Wentworth, I suppose. What's he make of it?"

"He—doesn't know."

"God help us! Well, go write your story. If we've got a plant by press time, we'll have something on page one to-morrow—if there's anyone to read it."

BY morning the fires in the metropolitan area had been brought under control and it was found that neither the loss of life nor the damage was as great as had at first been feared. Mainly it was the older types of buildings that had suffered the most.

The same thing was true in other parts of the country and elsewhere in the world; and elsewhere, as in New York, people pulled themselves together, cleared up the debris, and went ahead with their occupations. Business was resumed, and rebuilding operations were begun.

Meanwhile, where were those fiery moths that had sprung so devastatingly from their strange cocoons?

For a while no one knew and it was believed they had indeed winged off into interstellar space, as Joan had suggested that night on Observatory Hill.

Then came rumors that damped these hopes, followed by eye-witness reports that altogether dashed them. The bat-like monsters had flown, not off into space, but to the world's waste-lands.

Strange, it was, the instinct that had led them unerringly to the remotest point of each continent. In North America it was the great Arizona desert, in South America the pampas of Argentina, in Europe the steppes of Russia, in Asia the Desert of Gobi, in Africa the Sahara, in Australia the Victoria; while in the British Isles, Philippines, New Zealand, Madagascar, Iceland, the East Indies, West Indies, South Seas and other islands of the world, the interiors were taken over by the demons, the populace fleeing for their lives.

As for the oceans, no one knew exactly what had happened there, though it was obvious they, too, had received their share of the bombardment on that fateful night; but, while temperatures were found to be somewhat above normal, scientists were of the opinion that the deadly spawn that had fallen there had failed to incubate.

IMMEDIATELY the presence of the monsters in the Arizona desert was verified, Overton called Jim Carter to his desk.

"Well, I've got a big assignment for you, boy," he said, rather more gently than was his fashion. "Maybe you know what, huh?"

"You want me to buzz out and interview those birds?"

"You guessed it. And photograph 'em!"

"Okay, Chief," said Carter, though he knew this would be the toughest job yet.

Overton knew it, too.

"It won't be easy," he said. "And it may be dangerous. You don't have to take the assignment unless you want."

"But I want."

"Good! I thought you would." He regarded the younger man admiringly, almost enviously. "Now, about those photos. The Television News people haven't been able to get a thing, nor the War Department—not so much as a still. So those photos will be valuable."

Overton paused, to let that sink in.

"They'll be worth a million, in fact, in addition to what the War Department offers. And to you they'll be worth ten thousand dollars."

"How come?"

"Because that's what the Old Man said."

"Well, I can use it!" said Jim, thinking of Joan.

"All right. Then go to it!"

LEAVING New York late that night, Carter timed his flight to arrive over the eastern edge of the desert just before dawn.

The trip was uneventful till he crossed the Rockies over New Mexico and eased down into Arizona. Then, flying low and fast, he suddenly caught a glow of color off ahead.

For an instant Jim thought it was the dawn, then called himself a fool. For one thing, the glow was in the west, not the east. And for another, altogether more significant, it was orange.

His quarry!

Pulling his stick back hard, he shot like a rocket to ten thousand feet, figuring that a higher altitude, besides giving him a better view of the lay of the land, would be considerably safer.

Winging on now at that height, he saw the orange tide rise higher in the west by seconds, as he rushed toward God knew what eery lair. He suddenly gasped in amazement, as he saw now something so incredible it left him numb.

Below, looming above the onrushing horizon was a city! But such a city as the brain of man could scarcely conceive, much less execute—a city of some fluorescent orange material, rising tier on tier, level on level, spreading out over the sandy floor of the desert for miles.

And, as Jim drew nearer, he saw, too, that this weird city was teeming with life—terrible life! Thousands of those hideous monsters were working there like an army of ants in a sand-hill—a sand-hill of glistening, molten glass, it seemed from the air.

Were they building their city from the sand of the desert, these hellish glaziers?

Carter decided to find out.

"Well, here goes!" he muttered, diving straight for that dazzling citadel, one hand on the stick, the other gripping the trigger of his automatic camera. "This'll make a picture for the Old Man, all right!"

Off to the east the dawn was breaking, and he saw, as he swept down, its pearly pastel shades blending weirdly with that blinding orange glare.

Pressing the trigger now, he drove his screaming plane on with throttle wide—and yet, it was glass! —glass of some sort, that crazy nightmare down there

"Whew!" gasped Carter as waves of dazing heat rose about him. "Boy, but it's hot! I can't stand much of this. Better get out while the getting's good."

But he clenched his teeth, and dove on down to see what those fiery demons looked like. Funny they didn't make any effort to attack. Surely they must see him now.

"Take that, my beauties!—and that!" he gasped, pressing the trigger of his camera furiously.

Then, at a scant two thousand feet, he levelled off, his wings blistering with the heat, and zoomed up again—when to his horror, his engine faltered; died.

IN that agonizing moment it came to Jim that this perhaps was why neither the Television News nor the War Department pilots had been able to get pictures of the hell below.

Had something about that daring heat killed their motors, too, as it had his? Had they plunged like fluttering, sizzling moths into that inferno of orange flame?

"Well, I guess it's curtains!" he muttered.

A glance at his altimeter showed a scant eighteen hundred now. Another glance showed the western boundary of the city, agonizing miles ahead. Could he make it? He'd try, anyway!

So, nursing his plane along in a shallow glide, Jim slipped down through that dazing heat.

"Got to keep her speed up!" he told himself, half deliriously, as he steadily lost altitude. "Can't pancake here, or I'll be a flapjack!"

At an altitude of less than a thousand he levelled off again, eased on down, fully expecting to feel his plane burst into flames. But though his eyebrows crisped and the gas must have boiled, the sturdy little plane made it.

On a long last glide, he put her wheels down on the sandy desert floor, a bare half mile beyond that searing hell.

The heat was still terrific but endurable now. He dared breathe deeper; he found his head clearing. But what was the good of it? It was only a respite. The monsters had seen him, all right—no doubt about that! Already they were swooping out of their weird citadel like a pack of furious hornets.

On they came, incredibly fast, moving in a wide half-circle that obviously was planned to envelop him.

Tense with horror, like a doomed man at the stake, Jim watched the flaming phalanx advance. And now he saw what they really were; saw that his first fantastic guess had been right.

They were *ants*—or at least more like ants than anything on earth—great fiery termites ten feet long, hideous mandibles snapping like steel, hot from the forge, their huge compound eyes burning like greenish electric fire in their livid orange sockets.

And another thing Jim saw, something that explained why the fearful insects had not flown up to attack him in the air. Their wings were gone!

They had molted, were earth-bound now.

THERE was much food for thought in this, but no time to think. Already the creatures were almost on him.

Jim turned his gaze from them and bent over his dials in a last frantic effort to get his motor started. The instinct of self-preservation was dominant now—and to his joy, suddenly the powerful little engine began to hum with life.

He drew one deep breath of infinite relief, then gave her the gun and whirled off down the desert

floor, the enraged horde after him.

For agonizing instants it was a nip-and-tuck race. Then as he felt his wheels lift, he pulled hard back on his stick, and swept up and away from the deadly claws that clutched after him in vain.

Climbing swiftly, Jim banked once, swept back, put the bead full on that scattering half-circle of fiery termites, and pressed the trigger of his automatic camera.

"There, babies!" he laughed grimly. "You're in the Rogues' Gallery now!"

Then, swinging off to the northeast, he continued to climb, giving that weird ant-hill a wide berth.

Funny, about those things losing their wings, he was thinking now. Would they grow them again, or were they on the ground for good? And what was their game out there in the desert, anyway?

Questions Jim couldn't answer, of course. Only time would tell. Meanwhile, he had some pictures that would make the Old Man sit up and take notice, not to mention the War Department.

"They'd better get the Army on the job before those babies get air-minded again!" he told himself, as he winged on into the rising sun. "Otherwise the show they've already staged may be only a little curtain-raiser."

JIM'S arrival in the city room of *The New York Press* that afternoon was a triumphant one, for he had radio-phoned the story ahead and extras were out all over the metropolitan area, with relays flashing from the front pages of papers everywhere.

No sooner had he turned over his precious pictures to the photographic department for development than Overton rushed him to a microphone, and made him repeat his experience for the television screen.

But the city editor's enthusiasm died when the negatives came out of the developer.

"There are your pictures!" he said, handing over a bunch of them.

Carter looked at them in dismay. They were all blank—just so much plain black celluloid.

"Over-exposed!" rasped Overton. "A hell of a photographer you are!"

"I sure am!" Jim agreed, still gazing ruefully at the ruined negatives. "Funny, though. The camera was checked before I started. I had the range before I pulled the trigger, every shot." He paused, then added, as though reluctant to excuse himself: "It must have been the heat."

"Yeah, I suppose so! Well, that was damn expensive heat for you, my lad. It cost you ten thousand bucks."

"Yes, but—"

Jim had been going to say it had nearly cost him his life but thought better of it. Besides, an idea had come.

"Give me those negatives!" he said. "I'm going to find out what's wrong with 'em."

And since they were of no use to Overton, he gave them to Jim.

THAT night again, Jim Carter presented himself at the Wentworth home in Hartford, and again it was Joan who admitted him.

"Oh, Jimmy!" she murmured, as he took her in his arms. "We're all so proud of you!"

"I'm glad someone is," he said.

"But what a fearful risk you ran! If you hadn't been able to get your motor started—"

"Why think of unpleasant things?" he said with a smile.

Then they went into the library, where Professor Wentworth added his congratulations.

"But I'm afraid I didn't accomplish much," said Jim, explaining about the pictures.

"Let me see them," said the professor.

Jim handed them over.

For a moment or two Professor Wentworth examined them intently, holding them this way and that.

"They indeed appear to be extremely over-exposed," he admitted at length. "Your Fire Ants are doubtless radio-active to a high degree. The results could not have been much worse had you tried to photograph the sun direct."

"I thought as much," said Carter, gloomily.

"But possibly the damage isn't irreparable. Suppose we try re-developing a few of these negatives."

He led the way to his study, which since the destruction of the observatory had been converted into a temporary laboratory.

TEN minutes later, Professor Wentworth had his re-developing bath ready in a porcelain basin and had plunged some of the negatives into it.

"This process is what photographers call intensification," he explained. "It consists chemically in the oxidation of a part of the silver of which the image is composed. I have here in solution uranium nitrate, plus potassium ferricyanide acidified with acetic acid. The latter salt, in the presence of the acid, is an oxidizing agent, and, when applied to the image, produces silver oxide, which with the excess of acetic acid forms silver acetate."

"Which is all so much Greek to me!" said Carter.

"At the same time, the ferricyanide is reduced to ferrocyanide," the professor went on, with a smile at Joan, "whereupon insoluble red uranium ferrocyanide is produced, and, while some of the silver, in being oxidized by this process, is rendered soluble and removed from the negative into the solution, it is replaced by the highly non-actinic and insoluble uranium compound."

The process was one quite familiar to photographers experienced in astronomical work, he explained. In fifteen minutes they should know what results they were getting.

But when fifteen minutes passed and the negatives were still as black as ever, Jim's hopes waned.

Not so Professor Wentworth's, however.

"There is a definite but slow reaction taking place," he said after a careful examination. "Either the over-exposure is even greater than I had suspected, or the actinic rays from your interesting subjects have formed a stubborn chemical union with the silver of the image. In the latter event, which is the theory I am going to work on, we must speed up the reaction and tear some of that excess silver off, if we're ever to see what is underneath."

"But how are you going to speed up the reaction?" asked Jim. "I thought that uranium was pretty strong stuff by itself."

"It is, but not as strong as this new substance we have in combination with the silver here. So I think I'll try a little electrolysis—or, in plain English, electro-plating."

As he spoke, the professor clipped a couple of platinum electrodes to the basin, one at each end. To the anode he attached one of the negatives, to the cathode a small piece of iron.

"Now then, we'll soon see."

He passed a low current into the wires, through a rheostat, with startling results. There was a sudden foaming of the solution and a weird vapor rose from it, luminous, milky, faintly orange.

FOR a moment, all they could do was stare.

Then Professor Wentworth switched off the current and stepped toward the tank. Waving away that

orange gas, he reached for the cathode and held it up. It was no longer iron, but silver, now.

"Plated, you see!" he exclaimed in triumph.

"Yes, but those fumes!" cried Jim "Why, they were the same color as the—the Fire Ants, as you call them"

"I know." The professor was not as calm as he pretended. "We have released some of their actinic rays captured by the negative, in prying loose our excess silver. Later I shall repeat the process and capture some of that vapor for analysis. At present, let us have a look at the negative already treated."

He lifted the anode from the solution now, removed the negative, and held it up. A smile of satisfaction broke over his face, followed by a shudder.

"There you are, Jim! Have a look!"

Jim looked, with Joan peering over his shoulder, and his pulses tingled. It was a clear shot of that scattering half-circle of fiery termites, taken after he got away and swept back over them.

"Say, that's wonderful!" he exclaimed.

"Wonderful—but horrible!" echoed Joan.

"I'll admit they're not much on looks," laughed Carter. "But their homely maps are worth a lot to me—ten thousand dollars, in fact!"

He told her why, and what he proposed to do with the money, and Joan thought it a very good idea.

While this was taking place, Professor Wentworth was re-developing the rest of the negatives.

At last all had been salvaged, even those taken in the terrific heat over that weird glass city out there, and Jim was preparing to bear them back to Overton in triumph.

He had thanked the kindly professor from the bottom of his heart, had even told him something of what he had been telling Joan. There remained but to put one last question, then go.

"Summing it all up, what do you make of those nightmares?" he asked. "Do you think they can be destroyed?"

Professor Wentworth did not reply at once.

"I can perhaps answer your question better when I have analyzed this specimen of gas," he said at length, holding up a test-tube in which swirled a quantity of that luminous, milky orange vapor. "But if you wish to quote me for publication, you may say that when I have learned the nature of it, I shall devote all my energies to combating the menace it constitutes."

And that was the message Jim took back with him, but it was the pictures that interested the practical Overton most.

BEFORE many days, however, Overton, with the rest of the world, was turning anxiously to Professor Wentworth, watching his every move, awaiting his every word. For before many days terrible reports started coming in, not only from the Arizona desert but from the assembly grounds of the Fire Ants everywhere.

Those deadly termites were on the move! They were spreading from their central citadels in ominous, expanding circles—circles that engulfed villages, towns and cities in a swift, relentless ring of annihilation that was fairly stupefying.

In North America, the cities of Phoenix, Tucson and Prescott, with all that lay between, were already gone, their frantic populaces fleeing to the four points of the compass before that fateful orange tide. In South America, Rosario and Cordoba were within the flaming

ring and Buenos Aires was threatened. In Europe, Moscow and its vast tributary plain had fallen before the invaders. In Asia, a veritable inland empire was theirs, reaching from Urga to the Khingan Mountains. In Africa, Southern Algeria and French Sudan, with their innumerable small villages and oases, were overrun. In Australia, Coolgardie had succumbed and Perth was in a panic.

But fearful though the destruction was on the continents, it was the islands of the world that suffered most. First the smallest, those picturesque green gems of the South Seas, crisped and perished. Then came reports of the doom of the Hawaiian group, the Philippines, the East and West Indies, New Zealand, Tasmania and a score of others, their populations perishing by the thousands, as shipping proved unavailable to transport them to safety.

By far the most tragic fate, however, was that suffered by the British Isles. What happened there stunned the world, and brought realization to humanity that unless some miracle intervened, it was but a mirror of the doom that awaited all. For England, Ireland and Scotland were habitable no more. London, Dublin, Glasgow—all their proud cities, all their peaceful hamlets, centuries old, were flaming ruins.

Out of a population of some sixty millions, it was estimated that at least eight million must have perished. The rest, by prodigious feats of transportation, managed to reach the mainland, where they spread as refugees throughout an apprehensive, demoralized Europe.

AS for the armies and navies of the world, they were powerless before this fiendish invader. Hammered with high explosives, drenched with chemicals, sprayed with machine-gun bullets, the fiery termites surged on, unchecked, in ever-widening circles of death.

Lead and steel passed through them harmlessly. Gas wafted off them like air. Despite the frantic efforts of scientists and military men, nothing could be devised to stem that all-devouring orange tide.

It was quite obvious by now, even to the most conservative minds, that the end of human life on earth was not far off. It could only be a few more weeks before the last stronghold fell. Daily, hourly, those deadly Fire Ants were everywhere expanding their fields of operations. Presently all humanity would be driven to the seacoasts, there to perish by fire or water, as they chose.

There were some optimists, of course, who believed that the miracle would happen—that Professor Wentworth or some other scientist would devise some means of repelling the invader before it was too late.

Young Jim Carter of *The New York Press* was not among them, however, though he would have gambled it would be Professor Wentworth if anyone. For what hope was there that any mere man could figure out a weapon that would be effective against such a deadly, such a superhuman foe?

Very little, it seemed, and he grew less and less sanguine, as he continued his frenzied, sleepless work of reporting the unending catastrophes for his paper.

He often thought bitterly of that ten thousand dollars. A lot of good that would do him now!

As for Joan, she faced her fate with fortitude—fortitude and a supreme faith that her father would succeed in analyzing that sinister orange vapor and find the weapon the world waited for.

But agonizing days passed and he did not find it.

Then at last, on the night of August 14th, when Los Angeles and San Francisco were smoldering infernos, along with Reno, Denver, Omaha, El Paso and a score of other great American cities; when Buenos Aires and Santiago were gone, Berlin and Peking and Cairo; when Australia was all one fiery hell—then it was that Professor Wentworth summoned Jim Carter to Hartford.

HOPING against hope, he hurried over.

Once again, Joan ushered him into the house. She was very pale and did not speak.

At her side stood her father. It was he who spoke.

"Good evening, Jim. You have come promptly."

His voice was strained, his face grave. He had aged greatly in the past few weeks.

"Well I'll admit I clipped along. You've—found something?"

Professor Wentworth smiled wanly.

"Suppose you step into my study and see what I have found."

He led the way toward the little makeshift laboratory that for many days and nights had been the scene of his efforts.

It was littered with strange devices now, strangest of all perhaps a huge glass tube like a cannon, mounted on some sort of swivel base.

Ignoring this for the moment, he turned to a smaller tube set upright on a table at the far end of the room. In it, glowed a sinister orange lump that made the whole tube fluorescent.

"Behold one of your monsters in captivity!" said the professor, again with a wan smile. "In miniature, of course. What I have done is to condense some of that vapor into a solid."

The process, he explained, was similar to that employed by Madame Curie in obtaining metallic radium—electrolyzing a radium chloride solution with mercury as a cathode, then driving off the mercury by heat in a current of hydrogen—only he had used the new element instead of radium.

"Incidentally, I have learned that this new element is far more radioactive than radium and possesses many curious properties. Among them, it decomposes violently in water—particularly salt water—producing harmless hydrogen and chloride compounds. So we have nothing to fear from those seeds that fell in our oceans, lakes and rivers."

"Well, that's something, anyway," said Jim. "But have you found any way to combat the ones that have already hatched?"

"Before I answer that question," Professor Wentworth replied, "I shall let you witness a little demonstration."

He advanced to the cannon-like device at the other end of the room, swung it on its swivel till it was pointing directly at that fluorescent orange tube on the table.

"Watch closely!" he said, throwing a switch.

There was a sudden, whining hum in the air and the nib of the big tube glowed a soft, velvety green. Jim gazed at the scene with rapt attention.

"Don't look at that one!" whispered Joan. "Look at the other!"

Jim did so, and saw that its fluorescence was waning.

A moment more the professor held the current on, while the tube grew white. Then he threw off the switch.

"Now let us have a look at our captive," he said, striding over.

They followed, and one glance told Jim what had happened. That sinister lump of orange metal had vanished.

BUT where was it? That was what he wanted to know.

"A natural question, but not one easy to answer," was Professor Wentworth's reply. "I shall tell you what I have done; then you may judge for yourself."

The cannon-like device which had accompanied the seeming miracle was an adaptation of the cathode tube, whose rays are identical with the beta rays of the atom and consist of a stream of negatively charged particles moving at the velocity of light—186,000 miles a second. These rays, in theory, have the power to combine with the positively charged alpha rays of the atom and drag them from their electrons, causing them to discharge their full quanta of energy at once, in the form of complete disintegration—and it was this theory the professor had acted on.

"But, good Lord—that's splitting the atom!" exclaimed Jim. "You don't mean to say you've done that?"

"I apparently have," was the grave admission. "But do not let it seem such a miracle. Bear in mind, as I have pointed out before, that nature has accomplished this alchemy many times. All radio-active elements are evidences of it. The feat consists merely in altering the valence of the atom, changing its electric charge, in other words. What I have done in the present instance is merely to speed up a process nature already had under way, inasmuch as we are dealing with a radio-active substance."

"But what has happened to the by-product of the reaction?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I have not had time to study that phase of it. Heat, mainly, was produced. Possibly a few atoms of helium. But the substance is gone. That is our chief concern just now."

It was only after abandoning chemical means and turning to physics that he had met with success, he said. Cathode rays had finally proved the key to the riddle.

"But do you think this thing will work on a big scale?" asked Jim regarding that fragile tube doubtfully.

Professor Wentworth hesitated before replying.

"I do not know," he admitted, "but I intend to find out—to-night."

JIM looked at him in amazement. "To-night?"

"Yes. Or rather, the experiment will be at dawn. If successful, this continent at least will be rid of the menace."

Jim's amazement turned to incredulity and a sudden fear gripped him. Had the strain of the past few weeks unbalanced the professor's mind?

"But surely you can't hope to wipe them out with one tube. Why, it would take hundreds."

"No, only one. You see, I am going to place the tube in the center of the circle and direct its rays outward toward the circumference in a swinging radius."

Whereupon, for a moment, Jim's fear seemed confirmed.

"But, good God!" he exclaimed. "It couldn't possibly be that powerful, could it?"

"I think it can be made to be," was Professor Wentworth's grave assurance. "The greatest power we know in the universe is radiant energy, which reaches us from the sun and the stars, traveling at the speed of light.

"Like light rays, these heat rays can be focused, directed; and the beta rays of the cathode, traveling at the same velocity, can be made to ride these rays of radiant heat much as electric power rides radio waves. The giant, in short, can be made to carry the dwarf, with his deadly little weapon. That, at least, is the theory I am acting on."

This somewhat allayed Jim's fears

—fears that vanished when the professor went on to explain somewhat the working of his mechanism.

"But how are you going to get the thing out there?" he asked, picturing with a shudder the center of the flaming hell.

"I imagine the War Department will provide me with a volunteer plane and pilot for the purpose," was the calm reply.

"And you will go?"

"Yes, I will go."

Jim debated, but not for long.

"Well, you needn't trouble the War Department. Here's your volunteer pilot! The plane's outside. When do we start?"

"But, my dear young man!" objected the professor. "I cannot permit you to make this sacrifice. It is suicide, sheer suicide."

"Is my life any more precious than yours, or that of some volunteer Army pilot?" Jim asked him.

"But there is Joan. If I fail—she must depend on you."

"If you fail, Professor, Joan won't need me or anyone, for long. No, I go. So let's chuck the argument and get ready."

"Oh, Jimmy!" sobbed Joan. "Jimmy"

But her eyes, as they met his mistily, were lit with a proud splendor.

TWO hours later, Jim Carter's little auto-plane lifted into the night, and, with that precious tube mounted above the cabin, winged swiftly westward.

As on his former foray into that fiery realm, Jimmy timed his flight to arrive over the eastern edge of the Arizona desert just before dawn. Somewhere in that great sandy waste, they felt, there would be a place to set the plane down and get the ray going.

Professor Wentworth had broadcast the particulars of his tube to his scientific colleagues wherever humanity still remained, and the eyes of the world were on this flight. If successful, swift planes would bear similar tubes to the centers of the devastated regions elsewhere, and sweep outward with their deadly rays. The earth would be rid of this fiery invader. If it were not successful. . . .

Jim preferred not to think of that, as he drove on into the night.

Crossing the Missouri River at dark and deserted Kansas City, they soon saw the eastern arc of that deadly orange circle loom on the horizon. To get over it safely, Jim rose to twenty thousand feet, but even there the heat, as they sped across the frontier into enemy territory, was terrific.

Anxiously he watched his revs and prayed for his motor to hold up. If it stopped now, they were cooked!

The sturdy engine purred on with scarcely a flutter, however, and soon they were behind the lines, in a region pitted with the smoldering fires of towns and cities.

It made them shudder, it presented such an appalling panorama of ruin. But at the same time, it strengthened their hope. For very few flares of orange gleamed now among the red. The main forces of the invader were at the front. That meant there should be a safe place to land somewhere.

AN hour later, some miles beyond that weird glass citadel that had been their objective, they found a wide stretch of empty desert, and there Jim brought the little plane down to a faultless landing, just as dawn was lightening the east.

Stepping out, he drew a deep breath of relief. For had he crashed, or smashed that fragile tube, all would have been in vain.

"Well, here we are!" he exclaimed, grimly cheerful, as Pro-

fessor Wentworth stepped out after him. "Now let's—"

Then he broke off, horrified, as he saw another figure follow the professor from the cabin.

"Joan!" he gasped.

"Present!" she replied.

"But, my daughter!" the professor's voice broke in. "My dear child!" A sob shook him. "Why, why, this is—"

"Please don't let's talk about it!" she begged, giving his arm a little pat. "I'm here and it can't be helped now. I was only afraid you'd find me before it was too late and take me back."

Then, edging over to Jim and slipping her arm in his, she murmured:

"Oh, my dear! Don't you see I couldn't stay behind? I had to be with you at the end, Jimmy, if—"

"It won't be!" he cried, pressing her cold hand. "It can't be!"

Then he turned to give his attention to her father, who had already mounted to the cockpit and was working absorbedly over his mechanism in the pale light of the coming day.

Any moment, Jim knew, those flaming termites might discover them, and come swooping down. With keen eyes he scanned the horizon. No sign of them yet.

"How are you up there?" he called.

"About ready," was the reply. "But I shall want more light than this for my mirrors."

Tensely, counting the seconds, they waited for the sunrise. . . .

AND now, as they waited, suddenly a sinister tinge of orange suffused the rosy hues of the east.

"The Fire Ants!" cried Joan, shrinking. "They've seen us! They're coming!"

It was true. Jim saw with a heavy heart.

Turning to Professor Wentworth, he gasped out:

"Quick! We've got to do something! You've no idea how fast they move!"

"Very well." The professor's voice was strangely calm. "You may start your motor. I shall do what I can. Though if we only had the sun—"

Jim leaped for the cabin.

A touch of the starter and the powerful engine came in. Braking his wheels hard, to hold the plane on the ground, he advanced the throttle as much as he dared, and sent a high-tension current surging through the wires the professor had connected with his tube above.

Soon came that high, whining hum they had heard in the laboratory—a thousand times magnified now—and the nib of the big tube glowed a livid, eery green in the lemon dawn.

"Joan!" called her father sharply. "Get in the cabin with Jim!"

She did so, her eyes still fixed in horrified fascination on the eastern horizon; and in that tense instant, she saw two things. First, a great orange arc of fiery termites, bearing down on them; and second, another arc, far greater—the vast, saffron rim of the rising sun.

Those two things Joan saw—and so did Jim—as their eardrums almost burst with the stupendous vibration that came from the gun in the cockpit. Then they saw a third, something that left them mute with awe.

As Professor Wentworth swung his cannon ray upon that advancing horde, it melted, vanished, leaving only the clear yellow of the morning sunlight before their bewildered eyes.

BUT the professor did not cease. For five minutes—ten, fifteen—he swung that mighty ray around, stepping up its power, lengthening

its range, as it reached its invisible, annihilating arm farther and farther out. . . .

Meanwhile Jim was radio-phoning frantically. The air seemed strangely full of static.

At last he got Overton of *The New York Press*.

"Carter speaking, out in Arizona," he said. "Getting any reports on the ray?"

And back came the tremendous news:

"Results! Man, the world's crazy! They're gone—everywhere! Tell the professor to lay off, before he sends us scooting too."

"Right!" said Jim, cutting his motor. "More later!"

And to Professor Wentworth he called:

"All right, that's enough! That ray was stronger than you knew!"

But there came no answer, and mounting to the wing-tip, Joan following, Jim saw a sight that froze him with horror. They beheld the professor, slumped against the tube, his whole body glowing a pale, fluorescent green.

"Father!" screamed Joan, rushing to his side. "Oh, Father!"

The man stirred, motioned her away, gasped weakly:

"Do not touch me, child—until the luminosity goes. I am highly radio-active. I had no time to—insulate the tube. No time to find out how. Had to—hurry—"

His voice waned off and they knew he was dead. The two stood there stunned by the realization of his great sacrifice.

He and Joan had set forth on this venture knowing they stood at least a chance, thought Jim, but Professor Wentworth had known from the start that it was sure death for him.

THE sun stood out above the eastern horizon like a huge gold coin, bright with the promise of life to spend, when Jim and Joan took off at last for the return home; but the radiance of the morning was dimmed by the knowledge of the tragic burden they bore.

For some moments, as they winged on, both were silent.

"Look!" said Jim at length. "Look ahead, Joan!"

She looked, brightened somewhat. "Yes, I see."

And after a moment, lifting her hazel eyes to his, she said, "Oh, Jimmy, I'm sure it means happiness for us."

"Yes, I'm sure!"

She stirred, moved closer.

"Jimmy, you—you're all I have now."

He made no reply, save to press her trembling hand. But it was enough.

Silently, understandingly, they winged onward into the morning light.

Coming—Soon

THE MIND MASTER

By Arthur J. Burks

A Sequel to "Manape the Mighty"



With the free hand he shot over a blow.

Brood of the Dark Moon

By Charles Willard Diffin

Conclusion

CHAPTER XX

On to the Pyramid

IT was like Walt Harkness to rush impetuously after where Diane was being drawn away, but who, under the same circumstances, would have done otherwise? Yet it was like Chet, too, to keep a sane and level head, to check the first wild impulse to dash to their rescue, to realize that he would be throwing himself away by doing it and helping them not at all. It was like Chet to stop and

At last the three Earthlings meet face to face the diabolical Something of the uncanny powers.

think when thinking was desperately needed, though what it would lead to he could not have told. There were many factors that entered into his calculations.

Half-consciously he had walked to the barricade that he might stare into the blackness beyond. The worst of the storm had passed, and the strong Earth-light forced its way through the thinning clouds in a cold, gray glow. It served to show the great gateway to the jungle, empty and black, until Chet saw more of the man-beasts he had called messengers.

A file of them, stolid, woodenly walking—he could not fail to know them from the ape-men of the tribe. And they moved through the darkness toward the sounds of shouts and laughter.

Chet saw them when they returned; following them were three others. Schwartzmann was not one of them, but the pilot, Max, Chet could distinguish plainly. the other two, he was sure, were the men of Schwartzmann's crew.

And, for each of them, all laughter and shouted jests had escaped. They moved like wooden toys half-come to life. And they, too, vanished where Walt and Diane had gone through the high arch of the jungle's open door.

Chet knew Kreiss was beside him; at a short distance, Towahg, staring above the palisade, buried his unkempt, hairy head in the shelter of his arms. All of Towahg's savage bravery had oozed away at direct sight of the pyramid men; Chet, even through his heavy-hearted dismay, was aware of the courage that must have carried this primitive man to their rescue on that other black night when the pyramid had been about to swallow them up.

TO the pyramid all Chet's thoughts had been tending. There Diane and Harkness were bound; there he, too, must go, though the thought of driving himself into that black maw, through the overpowering stench and down to the pit where some horror of mystery lay waiting, was almost more than his conscious mind could accept. But, with the sight of Towahg and the abject fear that had overwhelmed him, Chet found his own mind calmly determined, though through that cool self-detachment came savage spoken words.

"If poor Towahg could go near that damned place," he reasoned, "am I going to be stopped by anything between heaven and hell?"

And his mind was suddenly at ease with the certainty of the next step he must take. He turned to speak to Kreiss, but paused instead to stare into the dark where shadows that were not the ghosts of clouds were moving. Then his whispered orders came sharply to the scientist and to Towahg.

"Come!" he commanded. "Come quickly; follow me!"

The two were behind him as he found the narrow opening in the barrier's farther side, passed through, and crouched low in the darkness as he ran toward the lake where the shallow water of the shore took no mark of their hurrying feet.

AT the end of the lake he stopped. Beside him, Kreiss, weakened by his wound, was panting and gasping. Towahg, moving like a dark shadow, was close behind.

"I saw them," said Kreiss, when he had breath enough for speech, "—more beasts from the pyramid. They were coming for us! But we can go back there after a day or so."

"You can," Chet told him; "Towahg and I are going on."

"Where?" Kreiss demanded.

"To the pyramid."

Chet's reply was brief, and Kreiss' response was equally so. "You're a fool," he said.

"Sure," Chet told him. "I know there's nothing I can do to help them. But I'm going. All I ask is to get one crack at whatever it is that is down in that beastly pit, and if I can't do that maybe I can still save Diane and Walt from tortures you and I can't imagine." He touched his pistol suggestively.

"Still I say you are a fool," Kreiss insisted. "They are gone—captured, they will die. That is regrettable, but it is done. Now, besides Herr Schwartzmann who escaped, only we two remain; the savage, he does not count. We two!—and a new world!—and science! Science that remains after these two are gone—after you and I are gone! It is greater than us all.

"But I, staying, shall contribute to the knowledge of men; I shall make discoveries that will bear my name always. This world is my laboratory; I have found deposits such as none has ever seen on Earth.

"Be reasonable, Herr Bullard. The enemy has tracked us down by his superior cleverness. We will go far away now where he never shall find us, you and I. Do not be a fool; do not throw your life away."

CHET BULLARD, a figure of helpless, hopeless despair, stood unspeaking while he stared into the black depths of the jungle, and the night wind whipped his tattered clothing about him.

"A fool!" he said at last, and his voice was dull and heavy. "I guess you're right—"

Herr Kreiss interrupted: "Of course I am right—right and reasonable and logical!"

Chet went on as if the other had not spoken.

"If I hadn't been a fool I would have found some way to prevent it; I would have killed that apething when first I saw it; I would have got them free."

He turned slowly to face his companion in the darkness.

"But you were wrong, Kreiss; you forgot a couple of things. You said they found us by their superior cleverness. That's wrong. They found us because you left a trail they could follow. We threw them off once, Towahg and I, but the messenger wouldn't be fooled. Then Schwartzmann and his pack followed the messenger in.

"And you say it is logical that I should quit here, leave Diane and Walt to take whatever is coming; you say I'm a fool to stay with them till the end.

"Well,"—he was speaking very quietly, very simply—"if you are right I'm rather glad that I'm a fool. For you see, Kreiss, they're my friends, and between friends logic gets knocked all to hell.

"Come on, Towahg!" he called. "Let's see if we can travel this jungle in the night!" He set off toward the fringe of great trees, then let Towahg go ahead to find a trail.

TRAVEL at night through the tangle of creepers was not humanly possible. Even Towahg, after an hour's work, grunted his disgust and curled himself up for the night. And Chet, though he found his mind filled with vain imaginings, was so drained by the day's demands on his nervous energy that he slept through to the rising of the sun.

Then they circled wide of the trail they had taken before; no risk would Chet take of a chance meeting with one of the pyramid apes. And he plagued his brain with

vain questions of what he should do when he reached the arena and the pyramid and the unknown something that waited within, until he told himself in desperation. "You're going down, you're going into that damned place; that's all you know for sure."

Whereupon his questioning ceased, and his mind was clear enough to think of giant creepers that barred his way, of streams to be crossed, and to wonder, at the last, when the valley of the pyramid was in sight and whether the others had reached there before him.

Another day's sun was beating straight down into the arena when again it opened before Chet's eyes. And the bleak horror of this place of black and white that had seemed so incredibly unreal under Earth-lit skies was doubly so in the glare of noon.

They entered through the jagged crack that had been their means of escape. An earthquake, one time, had split the stone, and Chet was more than satisfied to avoid the broad entrance where the rocks made a gateway and where hostile eyes might be watching.

HE stood for long minutes in the cleft in the rocks where the hard earth of the arena made a floor before him, where the huge steps of ribboned white and black swung out on either hand, and where, directly ahead, in the same hard, contrasting strata, a pyramid lifted itself to finish in a projecting capstone. And now that he faced it he found himself curiously cool.

He motioned Towahg to his side, and the black came cowering and trembling. He had tried before to ask Towahg about the mystery of the pyramid, but Towahg had never understood, or, as Chet believed, he had pretended not to understand. But now he could no longer feign ignorance of Chet's queries.

Chet pointed to the pyramid with a commanding hand. "What is there?" he demanded. "Towahg afraid! What is Towahg afraid of? Ape-men go in there—Gr-r-ranga-men; who sends for them?"

And Towahg, who must know the sense of the questions, even though some words were strange, could not answer. He dropped to his knees there in the narrow, ragged chasm in the rock and clutched at Chet's legs with his two hands, while he buried his shaggy head in his arms. Then—

"Krargh!" he wailed. "Krargh there! Krargh send—Gr-r-ranga go. Gr-r-ranga no come back!"

It was perhaps the longest speech Towahg had ever made, and Chet nodded his understanding. "Yes," he agreed; "that's right, I imagine. When Krargh sends for you, you never come back."

But more eloquent than the ape-man's halting words was the trembling of his muscle-knotted shoulders in a fear that struck him limp at Chet's feet. And the pilot realized that the fear was inspired in part by the thought in the savage mind that his master might ask him to go closer to the place of dread. He had followed them once and had struck down a messenger, but this was when he was avid with curiosity and half-worshipful of the white men as gods. Now, to go that dreadful way in full daylight!—it was more than Towahg could face.

CHET patted the cringing shoulder with a kindly hand. "Get up, Towahg," he ordered and pointed back toward the jungle. "Towahg wait outside, wait to-day and to-night!" He gave the ape-man's sign of the open and closed hand to signify one day and one night, and Towahg's grunt was half

in relief and half in understanding as he slipped back into hiding where the jungle pressed close.

Chet turned again to the pyramid. "They're down there," he told himself, "facing God knows what. And now it's sink or swim, and I'm almighty afraid I know which it's to be. But we'll take it together. 'When Krargh sends for you, you never come back.'"

No jungle sounds were here in this silent arena, no flashing of leather-winged birds nor scuttling of little, odd creatures of the ground. It was as if some terror had spread its dark wings above the place, a terror unseen of men. But the little, wild things of earth and air had seen, and they had fled long since from a place unclean and unfit for life.

Chet felt the silence pressing heavily upon him as he took his hand from the rock at his side and stepped out into the arena. And the vast amphitheater seemed peopled with phantom shapes that sat in serried rows and watched him with dead and terrible eyes, while he went the long way to the pyramid's base, and his feet found the rough stone ascent. . . .

CHAPTER XXI

The Monstrous Something

THE way to the top of the pyramid was long. One look Chet allowed himself out over this world—one slow, sweeping gaze that took in the bare floor at the pyramid's base, a level platform of rock some distance in front of the pyramid, the hard black and white of the walled oval, the sea of waving green that was the jungle beyond, and, beyond that, hills, misty and shimmering in the noonday heat. And nestled there, beyond that last bare ridge, must be the valley of happiness, Diane Delacouer's "Happy Valley."

Chet Bullard turned abruptly where the projecting capstone hung heavy above a shadowed entrance. He entered the blackness within, stopped once in choking nausea as the first wave of vile air struck him, then fought his way on till his searching feet found the stairway, and he knew he was descending into a pit that held something inhumanly horrible—an abomination unto all gods of decency and right.

And still there persisted that abnormal coolness that made him almost light-headed, almost carefree. Even the fetid stench ceased to offend. His feet moved with never a sound to find the first step—and the next—and the next. He must go cautiously; he must not betray his presence until he was ready to strike.

Just where that blow would be delivered or against what adversary he could not tell, and perhaps it would be given him only to save Diane and Walt by the grace of a merciful bullet. It made no difference. Nothing made any difference any more; they had had their day, and now if the night came suddenly that was all he could ask. And still his cautious feet were carrying him down and yet down. . . .

HE was far below the surface of the ground when he found the foot of the stairs. They had been a spiral; his hand had touched one wall that led him smoothly around a shaft like a great well. And now there was firm rock beneath his feet, where, with one hand still guiding him along the stone wall, he followed the wall into a darkness that was an almost solid, opaque black. He seemed lost in a great void, smothered in silence, and buried under the black weight of the pressing dark, until the sound of a footfall gave him sense of direction and of distance.

It made soft echoings along rock walls that picked up every slightest rustle, and Chet realized again how cautious his own advance must be. It came toward him, soft, scuffing, followed the wall where he stood . . . and Chet felt that approaching presence almost upon him before he stepped silently out and away.

And in the darkness that blotted out his sight he sensed with some inner eye the passing ape-man with arms rigidly extended, while a wave of thankfulness flooded him as he realized that in the dark the brute was as blind as himself and that the terrible thing that had sent him could see at a distance only with the ape-man's eyes.

Here was something definite to count on. As long as he remained silent, as long as he kept himself hidden, he was safe.

The scuffing footsteps had gone to nothing in the distance when Chet reached out for the wall and went swiftly, carefully, on. The messenger had come this way; he could hurry now that he knew there was safe footing in the dark.

The wall ended in a sharp corner; it formed a right angle, and the new surface went on and away from him. Chet was debating whether he should follow or should cast out into the darkness when his staring eyes found the first touch of light.

IT came from above, a wavering line that trembled to a flame which seemed curiously cold. The line grew: a foot-wide band of light high up on the wall, it thrust itself forward like a tendril of the horrible plants he had seen. It grew on and wrapped itself about a great room, while, behind it, cold flames flickered and leaped. And Chet, so interested was he in the motion of this light that seemed almost alive, realized only after some moments that the light was betraying him.

He glanced quickly about and found himself within a chamber of huge proportions. Walls that only nature could form reared themselves high in the putrescent air of the room; they curved into a ceiling, and from that ceiling there hung a glittering array of gems.

Chet knew them for great stalactites, and, even as he cast about desperately for some secluded nook, he marveled at the diamond brilliance of the display. But on the smooth floor of stone, where corresponding stalagmites must have been, were no traces of crystal growths, from which he knew that though nature had formed the room some other power had fitted it to its own use.

Chet's eyes were darting swift glances about. There was no single moving thing, no sign of life; he was still undiscovered. But it could not last long, this safety; he looked vainly for some niche where the light would not strike so clearly, so betrayingly.

Across the great chamber was a platform fifteen feet above the floor. Even at a distance Chet knew this was not a natural formation; he could see where the stones had been cleverly fitted. And now his eyes, accustomed to the light, saw that the platform was carpeted with hides and strange furs. There were some that hung over the edge; they reached almost to the upright block like a table or altar at the platform's base. On this altar another great hide of thick leather was spread; it dragged in places on the floor.

Bare floors, bare walls—no place where an intruder could remain concealed! Suddenly from the lighted mouth of another passage he heard sounds of many feet; the sounds of approaching feet.

THE impulse that threw him across the room was born of desperation; he raced frantically to cross the wide expanse before those feet brought their owners within view, and he fought to keep his panting breath inaudible while he tugged at the heavy leather altar covering, stiff and thick as a board; while he forced his crouching body beneath and found space there where he could move freely about.

It walled him in completely on the platform side where it hung to the floor, but on the other three sides there were gaps near the floor where the light shone in on two pedestals of stone that supported the stone top.

Between the pedestals Chet crouched, hardly daring to look, hardly daring to breathe, while feet, bare and black, tramped shufflingly past. They went in groups—he lost count of their number but knew there were hundreds; he heard them going to the platform above. And, through the sound of the naked feet, came disjointed fragments of thought that reached his brain, transformed to words.

Mere fragments at first: " . . . back; the Master goes first! . . . The lights—how grateful is their coolness! . . . Who stumbled? Careless and stupid ape! You, Bearer-captain, shall take him to the torture room; a touch of fire will help his infirmity!"

And there was a cold rage that accompanied the last which set Chet's tense nerves a-tingle. But there was no fear in the emotion; he was quivering with a fierce, instinctive, animal hate.

The black feet retraced their steps. Then there was silence, and Chet knew there was something above him on the platform; whether one or many he could not tell until an interchange of thoughts reached him to show there was at least more than one.

"A presence!" some unseen thing was thinking. "I sense a strange mental force!"

A MOMENT of panic gripped Chet at the threat of discovery. Then he forced himself to relax; he tried to make his mind a blank; or if not that, to think of anything but himself—of the jungle, the ape-men, of the two comrades who had been captured.

"Patience!" another thinker was counseling. "It is the captives; they draw near." And across the great room, from the same passage where he had entered, Chet heard again the sound of bare, scuffing feet.

He could see them at last; he dared to stop and peer along the floor. Bare feet—black, hairy legs, and then came sounds of clumping leather that brought Chet's heart into his throat, until, directly before the altar that made his shelter, he saw the stained shoes and torn leggings of Walt Harkness, and beside them, the little boots and jungle-stained stockings that encased the slender legs of Mademoiselle Diane.

They were there before him, Walt and Diane; he would see them if he but dared to look. And, from somewhere above, a confusion of thought messages poured in upon him like the unintelligible medley of many voices. Out of them came one, clearer, more commanding:

"Silence! Be still, all! Your Master speaks. I shall question the captives."

And there came to Chet, crouched beneath the altar, hardly breathing, listening, tense, a battering of questioning thoughts. He heard no answer from Harkness and Diane but he knew that their minds were open pages to the one from whom those thought-waves issued.

"Where are you from?—what

part of this globe? . . . Another world? Impossible! This is our own world Rajj. It is alone. There is no nearby star."

And after a moment when Harkness had silently answered, came other thoughts:

"Strange! Strange! This creature of an inferior race says that our world has joined hands with his, that his is greater, that our own world, Rajj, is now a satellite of his world that he calls by the strange name of 'Earth.'"

TO Chet it seemed that this one mysterious thinker, this "Master" of an unknown realm, was explaining his findings to other mysterious beings. There followed a babel of released thoughts from which Chet got only a confused impression of conflicting emotions: curiosity, rage, hate, and a cold ferocity that bound them into one powerful, vindictive whole.

Again the leader quieted the rest; again he laid open the minds of Walt and Diane for his exploring questions, while Chet mentally listened and tried to picture what manner of thing this was that held two Earth-folk helpless, that called them "creatures of an inferior race."

Super-men? No? Super-beasts, these must be. Chet was chilled with a nameless horror as he sensed the cold deadliness and implacable hate in the traces of emotion that clung and came to him with the thoughts. And his imagination balked at trying to picture thinking creatures so abominably vile as these thinkers must be.

The questions went on and on. Chet lost all sense of time. He had the feeling that the two helpless prisoners were being mentally flayed. No thought, no hidden emotion, but was stripped from them and displayed before the mental gaze of these inhuman inquisitors. No physical torture could have been more revolting.

And at last the ordeal was ended. Chet had forgotten Schwartzmann's men until the "Master's" order recalled them to his mind. "Bring the other captives!" the unspoken thought commanded.

CHET crouched low to see from under the hanging leather. Naked feet shuffled aimlessly; they were raised and put down again in the same position, until the dazed and hypnotized blacks received their orders and drew Diane and Harkness to one side. Then other leather-shod feet came into view as Max and his companions were brought forward.

But there was no more questioning. "Perhaps another day we shall amuse ourselves with them," a thinker said. Chet, for the first time was paying no attention.

A slit in the leather—it might have been where a spear had entered to slay a dinosaur in some earlier age—served now as a peephole from which Chet saw two gray and lifeless faces that were expressionless as stone. And, as if their bodies, too, were carved from granite, Diane and Harkness stood motionless.

He saw the blacks; saw that all eyes were on the other prisoners. Only Harkness and Diane stood with lowered gaze, staring stonily at the floor where the leather hung. And through Chet's mind flashed a quick impulse that set his nerves thrilling and quivering, though he checked the emotion in an instant lest some other mind should sense it.

Those other minds were not contacting Walt and Diane now. Could he reach them? Chet wondered. That they were conscious, that they knew with horrible clearness every detail of what went on, Chet was certain: his own brief experi-

ence that first night on the pyramid had taught him that. And now if these two could see and comprehend what they saw; if only he could send them a word—one flashing message of hope! His hands were working swiftly at his belt.

The detonite pistol slipped silently from its sheath. And as silently he placed it on the floor where the two were locking, then slid it cautiously underneath the leather that just cleared the floor.

HIS eye was close to the narrow slit. Did a change of expression flash for an instant across the face of Walt Harkness? Was it only imagination, or was there the briefest flicker of life in the dead eyes of Diane Delacouer? Chet could not be sure, but he dared to hope.

The "Master" was speaking. To Chet came a conviction that he must not fail to hear these thoughts. He restored the pistol to his belt.

"And now the time has come," flashed the message. "One thousand times has Rajj circled the sun since we put his light behind us and came down to the dark place that had been prepared.

"One hundred others and myself; we were the peerless leaders of a peerless race. To produce the marvelous mentality that made us what we were, all the forces of evolution had been laboring for ages. We were supreme, and for us there was nothing left; no further growth.

"Then, what said Vashta, the All-Wise One? That I and a hundred chosen ones should descend into the dark, there to live until a new world was ready for us, lest our great race of Krargh perish." Chet started at the name. Krargh! It was the same word that Towahg had used.

The mental message went on:

"And we alone survive. Our world of Rajj is a wasteland where once we and our fellows lived. And we have been patient, awaiting the day. The biped beasts, as you know, have been our food; we have trained them to be our slaves as well. By the power of our invincible minds we have sent them out to do our bidding and bring in more of the man-herd for slaughter when we hungered.

"AND now, remember the words of Vashta, the All-Wise: 'until a new world is ready.' O Peerless Ones, the new world waits. These ignorant, white animals have brought the word. We had thought that Vashta meant us to make a new world of our old world of Rajj, but what of this new world called Earth? Perhaps that will be ours."

Chet felt the thinker break in on his own thoughts.

"One thousand years, but not to a day. Tell us, O Keeper of the Records, when is the time?"

And another's thoughts came in answer: "Six days, Master; six days more."

The leader's thoughts crashed in with an almost physical violence:

"On the sixth night we shall go out! In darkness we have lived; in darkness we shall emerge. Then shall we feast in the arena of Vashta as we did of old. We shall see this new world; we shall breed and people the world; we shall take up our lives again.

"Let the captives live!" he commanded. "Feed them well. They shall be the sacrifice to Vashta—all but the woman. She shall see the blood of the others flow on the altar stone; then shall she come to me."

There was a chorus of mental protests; of counter claims. The leader quieted them as before.

"I am Master of All," he told them. "Would you dispute with me

over this beast of the Earth—a creature of no mental growth? Absurd! But she interests me somewhat; I will find her amusing for a time."

THERE were bearers who came crowding in; and again in groups they left. They were on the side where Chet dared not look, but he knew each group of blacks meant a mysterious something that was being carried carefully.

And somewhere in the confusion of black, shuffling feet the others vanished. No sight of Walt or Diane did the slitted leather give; only a motley crew of blacks who were left, and a wall, high-sprung to a glittering ceiling, and flaming, cold fire that ebbed and flowed till the room's last occupant was gone. Then the flames faded to dense blackness where only fitful images on the retina of Chet's staring eyes flared and waned, and ghostly voices seemed still whispering through the clamoring silence of the room. . . .

They were echoing within his brain and harshly at his taut nerves as he made his slow way toward the passage through which he had come. Despite their terror-filled urging he did not run, but took one silent, cautious step at a time, until, after centuries of waiting, his eyes found a square of light that was blinding; and he knew that he was stumbling through the portal in the top of the pyramid of Vashta—Vashta the All-Wise—unholy preceptor of an inhuman race.

CHAPTER XXII

Sacrifice

"DOWN in the pyramid! You went down there?" Herr Kreiss forgot even his absorbing experiments to exclaim incredulously at Chet's report.

Guided by Towahg, Chet had returned to Happy Valley. There had been six days and nights to be spent, and he felt that he should tell Kreiss what he had learned.

"Yes," said Chet dully; "yes, I went down."

He was seated on a rock in the enclosure they had built. He raised his deep-sunk, sleepless eyes to stare at the house where he and Walt had worked. There Walt and Diane were to have made their home; Chet found something infinitely pathetic now in the unfinished shelter: its very crudities seemed to cry aloud against the blight that had fallen upon the place.

"And what was there?" Kreiss demanded. "This hypnotic power—was it an attribute of the ape-men themselves? That seems highly improbable. Or was there something else—some other source of the thought waves or radiations of mental force?"

Chet was still answering almost in monosyllables. "Something else," he told Kreiss.

"Ah," exclaimed the scientist, "I should have liked to see them. Such mental attainment! Such control of the great thought-force which with us is so little developed! Mind—pure mentality—carried to that stage of conscious development, would be worthy of our highest admiration. I should like to meet such men."

"They're not men," said Chet; "they're—they're—"

He knew how unable he was to put into words his impression of the unseen things, and he suddenly became voluble with hate.

"God knows what they are!" he exclaimed, "but they're not men. 'Mind', you say; 'mentality!' Well, if those coldly devilish things are an example of what mind can evolve into when there's no decency of soul along with it, then

I tell you hell's full of some marvelous minds!"

He sprang abruptly to his feet.

"I've got to get out of here," he said; "I can't stand it. Four more days, and that's the end of it all. I'm going back to the ship. I saw it from up on the divide. Still buried in gas—but I'm going back. If I could just get in there I might do something. There's all our supplies—our storage of detonite; I might do some good work yet!"

HE was pacing up and down restlessly where a path had been worn on the grassy knoll, worn by his feet and the pitiful, bruised feet he had seen from his shelter in the pyramid; worn by Walt and Diane—his comrades! And they were helpless; their whole hope lay in him! The thought of his own impotence was maddening. He poured out the story of his experience in the pyramid, as if the telling might give him relief.

Kreiss sat in silence, listening to it all. He broke in at last.

"Wait!" he ordered. "There are some questions I would have answered. You said once that they found us—these devils that you tell of—because of the trail that I left. That is true?"

"Yes," Chet agreed irritably, "but what of it? It's all over now."

"Possibly not," Herr Kreiss demurred; "quite possibly not. The fault, it appears, was mine. Who shall say where the results of that fault shall lead?

"And you say that these thinking creatures are devils, and that they plan to sacrifice your good friends to strange gods: and still the fault leads on." Herr Kreiss, to whom cause and effect were sure guides, seemed meditating upon the strange workings of immutable laws.

"And you say that if you could reach the interior of your ship you might perhaps be of help. Yes, it is so! And the ship is engulfed in a fluid sea, but the sea is of gas. Now in that I am not to blame, and yet—and—yet—they all tie in together at the last; yes!"

"What are you talking about?" demanded Chet Bullard harshly. "It's no use to moralize on who is to blame. If you know anything to do, speak up; if not—"

Herr Kreiss raised his spare frame erect. "I shall do better than that," he stated; "I shall act." And Chet stared curiously after, as the thin figure clambered up on the rocks and vanished into the cave.

HE forgot him then and turned to stare moodily across the enclosure that had been the scene of their battle. Kreiss had done good work there: he had scared the savages into a panic fear. Chet was seeing again the scenes of that night when a faint explosion came from the rocks at his side. He looked up to see Herr Kreiss stagger from the cave.

Eyebrows and lashes were gone; his hair was singed short; but his thick glasses had protected his eyes. He breathed deeply of the outside air as he regarded the remnant of a bladder that once had held a sample of green gas. Then, without a word of explanation, he turned again into the cave where a thin trickle of smoke was issuing.

Ragged and torn, his clothes were held together by bits of vine. There were longer ropes of the same material that made a sling on his shoulders when he reappeared. And, tied in the sling, were bundles: one large, one small, but sagging with weight. Both were bound tightly in wrappings of broad leaves.

"We will go now," Herr Kreiss

stated; "there is no time to be lost."

"Go? Go where?" Chet's question echoed his utter bewilderment.

"To the ship! Come, savage!"—he motioned to Towahg—"I did not do well when I made my way alone. You shall lead now."

"He's crazy," Chet told himself half aloud! "his motor's shot and his controls are jammed! Oh, well; what's the difference? I might as well spend the time this way as any. I meant to go back to the old ship once more."

Kreiss' arm still troubled from the wound he had got in the fight, but Chet could not induce him to share his load.

"*Es ist mein recht*," he grumbled, and added cryptically: "To each man this only is sure—that he must carry his own cross." And Chet, with a shrug, let him have his way.

THERE was little said on the trip. Chet was as silent and uncommunicative as Kreiss when, for the last time, he paused on the divide to see the green glint from a distant ship, then plunged with the others into a forest as unreal as all this experience now seemed.

And at the last, when the red light of late afternoon ensanguined a wild world, they came to the smoke of Fire Valley, and a thousand fumeroles, little and big, that emitted their flame and gas. And one, at the lower end of the valley had built up a great mound of greasy mud from whose top issued hot billows of green gas. It was here that Kreiss paused and unslung his pack.

"Take this," he told Chet; and the pilot dragged his reluctant eyes from the view of the nearby cylinder enveloped in green clouds. The scientist was handing him the larger of the two packages. It was bulky but light; Chet took it by a loop in one of the vines.

"Careful!" warned Kreiss. "I have worked on it for a month; you see, my equipment was not so good. I thought that the time might come when it would be put to use, only first I must conquer the gas—which I now prepare to do."

"I don't understand," Chet protested.

"You are a Master Pilot of the World?" questioned Kreiss, and Chet nodded.

"And the control on your ship was a modification of the new ball-control mechanism such as is used on the latest of the high-level liners?"

Again Chet nodded.

"Then, if ever you are so fortunate, Herr Bullard, as to see once more that device on one of those ships, will you examine it carefully? And, stamped on the under side, you will find—"

"The patent marking," said Chet; then stopped short as the light of understanding blazed into his brain.

"Patented," he reflected; "that's what it says," and a wondering comprehension was in his voice: "patented by H. Kreiss, of Austria! You—you are the inventor?"

"I DID not speak with entire truth to Herr Schwartzmann," admitted Kreiss, "on that occasion when I told him I could not rebuild the control you had demolished. With your equipment on the ship I could have done a quite creditable job, but even now,"—he pointed to the leaf-wrapped bundle in Chet's hand—"with copper I have hammered from the rocks, and with silver and gold and even iron which I found occurring in a quite novel manner, I have done not so badly."

"This is—this is—" Chet stared at the object in his hand; his tongue could not be brought to

speak the words. "But what use? How can I get in? The gas—"

"Cause and effect!" stated Herr Doktor Kreiss of the Institute at Vienna, and once more he seemed addressing a class and taking pleasure in his ability to dispense knowledge. "It is the law of the universe.

"I perform an act. It is a cause—I have invoked the law. And the effects go out like circling waves in an endless ocean of time forever beyond our reach.

"But we can do other acts, produce other causes, and sometimes we can neutralize thereby the effects of the first. I do that now." He picked up the second bundle in its wrapping of leaves; it was heavy for him to manage with his wounded arm. "This is all that I have," he said! "I must place it surely.

"Go down toward the ship," he ordered. "Wait where it is safe. Then when the gas ceases you will have but three minutes. Three minutes!—remember! Lose no time at the port!"

He had reached the base of the hill of mud. He was on the windward side; above him the fumerole was grunting and roaring. And, to Chet, the thin figure, gaunt and ungainly and absurd in its wrappings of dilapidated garments, became somehow tremendous, vaguely symbolic. He could not get it clearly, but there was something there of the cool, reasoning sureness of science itself—an indomitable pressing on toward whatever goal the law might lead one to; but Kreiss was human as well. He stopped once and looked about him.

"A laboratory—this world!" he exclaimed. "Virgin! Untouched! . . . So much to be learned; so much to be done! And mine would have been the glory and fame of it!"

He turned hesitantly, almost apologetically, toward Chet standing motionless and unspeaking with the wonder of this turn of events.

"Should you be so fortunate as to survive," began Kreiss, "perhaps you would be so kind—my name—I would not want it lost." He straightened abruptly.

"Go!" he ordered. "Get as near as you can!" His feet were climbing steadily up the slippery ascent.

THE faintest breath of the gas warned Chet back. Almost infinitely diluted, it still set him choking while the tears streamed down his face. But he worked his way as near the ship as he dared, and he saw through the tears that still blinded his stinging eyes the tall figure of Kreiss as he reached the top.

A table of steaming mud was there, and Kreiss was sinking into it as he struggled forward. At the center was a hot throat where fumes like a breath from hell roared and choked with the strangling of its own gas. The figure writhed as a whirl of green enveloped it, threw itself forward. From one outstretched hand an object fell toward the throat; its leafy wrapping was whipped sharply for an instant by the coughing breath....

And then, where the hot blast had been, and the forming clouds and the erupting mud, was a pillar of fire—a white flame that thundered into the sky.

Straight and clean, like the sword of some guardian angel, it stood erect—a line of dazzling light in a darkening sky. And the fumes of green had vanished at its touch.

But Kreiss! Chet found himself running toward the fumerole. He must save him, drag him back. Then he knew with a certainty that admitted of no question that for Kreiss there was no help; that for this man of science the laws of cause and effect were no longer

operative on the plane of Earth. The heat would have killed him, but the enveloping gas must have reached him first. And he had sacrificed himself for what?—that he, Chet, might reach the ship! . . . Before Chet's eyes was a silvery cylinder whose closed port was plainly marked.

NO gas now! No glint of green! The way was clear, and the slim figure of Chet Bullard was checked in its rush toward a mound of mud and the body of a man that lay next a blasting column of flame; he turned instead to throw himself through the clean air toward the ship that was free of gas.

"Three minutes!" This was what Kreiss had said; this was the allotted time. In three minutes he must reach the ship, force open the long unused port, get inside—!

At one side, across the level lava rock he saw Towahg. The savage was running at top speed. He had thrown away his bow, dropping it lest it impede his flight from this terrifying witchcraft he had seen. There had been a witch-doctor in Towahg's tribe; the savage knew sorcery when he saw it. But never had his witch-doctor changed green gas to a column of fire; and this white sorcerer, Kreiss, powerful as he was, had been struck down by the fire-god before Towahg's eyes. Towahg ran as if the roaring finger of flame might reach after him at any instant.

Chet saw this in a glance—knew the reason for the black's desertion; then lost all thought of him and of Kreiss and even of the waiting ship. For, in the same glance, he saw, springing from behind a lava block, the heavy figure of a man.

Black as any ape, hairy of face, roaring strange oaths, the man threw himself upon Chet! It was Schwartzmann; and, mingled with profane exclamations, were the words: "the ship—und I take it for mineself!" And his heavy body hurled itself down upon the lighter man in the instant that Chet drew his pistol.

But, tearing through Chet's mind, was no rage against this man as an enemy in himself; he thought only of Kreiss' words; "Three minutes! Lose no time at the port!" And now the brave sacrifice! It would be in vain. He twisted himself about, so that his shoulder might receive the human projectile that was crashing upon him.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Might of the "Master"

AS with other measures of matters earthly, time is a relative gauge. Nowhere is this more apparent than in those moments of mental stress when time passes in a flash or, conversely, drags each lagging minute into hours of timeless length.

"Three minutes!" The words clanged and reverberated through Chet's brain. And it seemed, as he strained and struggled and was forced backward and yet backward by the weight of his antagonist, that those three minutes had long since passed, and other three's without end.

The enemy's leaping body had been upon him before the detonite pistol was half drawn. And now he fought desperately; he felt only the jar of blows that landed on his half-covered face. There was no sting or pain, only the crashing thud that made strange clamor and confusion in his head. But he ducked and blocked awkwardly with the one arm that held the package Kreiss had given him, while the other hand that gripped the pistol was twisted behind him.

No chance here for clever block-

ing, no room for quick foot-work; weight was telling, and the weight was all in favor of his big opponent.

Chet knew that possession of the gun was vital. Flashingly it came to him that Schwartzmann had not fired: his pistol, then, was lost, or he was out of ammunition. And now Chet's hand that held the gun with the six precious charges of detonite was fast in the clutch of a huge paw, and the pain of that twisted arm was sending searing flashes to his brain.

A twist of the body, and the pain relaxed. He dropped the leaf-wrapped package to the ground, and, with the free hand, shot over a blow that brought a grunt of pain from Schwartzmann and a gush of blood that smeared the black, hairy face. He took one stiff jolt himself on his half-averted head that he might counter with another to flatten that crushed and painful nose.

FOR one brief instant Schwartzmann's free hand was raised protectingly to his face so contorted with rage; for one brief instant, below that big fist, there showed the contour of a jaw; and, with every ounce of weight that Chet could put into the swing, he came up from under in that same instant with a smashing left that connected with the exposed jaw.

The hand that gripped his gun-hand did not let go completely, but Chet felt the steel-hard rigidity of that arm relax, and abruptly he knew that he could beat this man down if he once got clear. He didn't need the gun; he needed only to get both hands free. And, despite the arm that clung and swung with his, he managed to wrench himself into a sideways throw of his whole body at the instant he unclosed his hand. The slim barrel of the detonite pistol described a flashing arc through the clear air and clattered along the lava underneath a big shining surface of metal.

And then, in a breath-taking flash of understanding, Chet knew.

He knew he was beside the ship: he saw the closed port and the self-retracting lever that would open it, and he saw it through clear air where no taint of the green gas was apparent.

He was certain that he had been fighting for an interminable time, yet before him the air was clear. It was impossible, but true; and he threw the half-stunned body of Schwartzmann from him. Then, instead of following it with punishing blows, he sprang toward the port.

WITH one hand on the lever, he turned to dart a glance toward the column of flame. It was gone! And in its place came green, billowing gas that was coughed and spewed into the air to be caught up in the steady breeze that blew directly from the vent.

Beside him, his antagonist, prone on the lava floor, dragged himself beneath the ship to reach for the gun. Chet paid no heed; his every thought—his whole being, it seemed—was focused upon the lever that turned so slowly, that let fall, at last, a lock whose releasing mechanism clanged loudly through the metal wall.

The outer port, a thin door that served only to streamline the opening, swung open under Chet's hand. And, while he held his breath till his pumping heart set his whole body to pulsing, he drew himself into the ship as the green cloud wrapped thickly about. But first he bent to grasp the knotted vines and leathery leaves that enclosed a bulky package.

The port closed silently upon its soft-faced gasket; it was gas-

tight when no pressure was applied. And Chet stumbled and reached blindly till he fell beside the huge inner compression port, while the breath of gas that had touched him tore with ripping talons at his throat.

More measureless time—whether hours or minutes Chet could never have told—and he sat upright and tried to believe the utterly incredible story that his eyes were telling.

A short passage and a control room beyond! It was just as they had left it; was it days or years before? The shattered control cage was there, the familiar instrument board, the very bar of metal with which he had wrought such havoc in that wild moment of demolition; it was all crystal clear under the flooding light of the nitron illuminator!

YES, it was true! He, Chet Bullard, was staring wide-eyed at his own control-room, in his own ship—his and Walt's—and he was alone! The remembrance of Walt and Diane, and the realization that now, by some miracle, he might be of help, brought him to his feet.

He sprang toward a lookout where the last light of day was gone and a monstrous moon shone down upon a world of ghastly green. Yet, through the gas, every detail of the world outside showed clear; even the giant fumerole that had been the funeral pyre of a man of science; even the mound of ashes at its top which the moving air was blowing in dusty puffs until spouting mud fell back to hide them from sight.

Chet cursed the gas for the dimness that clouded his eyes, and he rubbed at them savagely as he turned and walked to a side lookout.

Through the riot of impressions of the fight outside the port, he had known that there was a human body over which he stumbled at times. He saw it now—the body of Schwartzmann's henchman, killed those long weeks before but preserved in the ceaseless flow of gas.

But now, sprawled across it, was another and bulkier shape. Sightless eyes stared upward from a face turned to the cruel gas clouds and the hideous green moon above. The mouth sagged open in a black, bearded face, and one hand still clutched a pistol. It would have shattered his human opponent had the man been given an instant more, but against the enemy that rolled down and overwhelmed him in billowing clouds no weapon could prevail. Herr Schwartzmann had fought his last fight.

THE package—the last gift of Kreiss—was still securely wrapped. It lay on the metal floor. Chet stooped to lift it, to work at the knotted vines and lay off the thick wrappings of fibrous leaves, until he stood at last, under the white glare of the bubbling nitron bulb, to stare and stare wordlessly at the cage of metal bars in his hand.

Crude!—yes; no finely polished mechanism, this; no one of the many connection clips that the other had had, either. But Chet knew he could solder on the hundreds of wires that made the nervous system of the control and fed the current to the cage; and Kreiss had believed it would work!

There was no thought of delay in Chet's mind, no waiting for daylight. This was the fourth night since he had been in that place of horror, since, above him in that Stygian pit, an inhuman satanic *something* had said: ". . . the captives . . . a sacrifice to Vashta . . . on the sixth night. . . ."

Chet threw off the rags that once had been a trim khaki jacket and went feverishly to work. And

through the time that was left he drove himself desperately. The hours so few and each hour so short! As he worked with seemingly countless strands of heavy cables, where each strand must be traced back and its point of connection determined, he knew how long each dreadful minute must be for the two captives deep inside the Dark Moon.

IT was as well, perhaps, that Chet did not have the power of distant sight, that he had no messenger like those from the pyramid who might have gone down in that place and have sent him by mental television a picture of what was there. For he would have seen that which could have lent no clarity of vision to his deep-sunk eyes nor skill to the touch of fumbling, tired hands.

Walt Harkness, no longer under hypnotic control, stood in a dim-lit room carved from solid stone; stood, and stared despairingly at the surrounding walls and at the pair of giant ape-men who guarded the one doorway. And, clinging to his hand, was a girl; and she, too, had been released from the invisible bonds. She was speaking:

"No, Walter; we both saw it; it must be true. It was Chet's pistol; he was there in that horrible place. And I will not give up. He will save us at the last; I know it! He will save us from the inhuman cruelty of those terrible things. He shoots straight, Chet does; and he will give us a bullet apiece from the gun—the last kindly act of a friend. That's what the signal meant."

"Then why did he wait! Why didn't he do it then?" Walt Harkness had made the same demand a hundred times.

And Diane answered as always: "I don't know, Walter, I—don't—know."

Chet, cursing insanely at strange machines—equilibrators that controlled the longitudinal and transverse and rotative stability of the ship and that refused to take their electrical charge—knew with horrible certainty that the last night had come. But to the two humans, in the depths of this world where all knowledge of time was lost, the knowledge came only when they were dragged by their guards into a familiar room.

APE-MEN were all about; they stared unwinkingly at the captives who stared back again in an effort to keep their eyes averted from the monstrous repulsiveness on the platform above them, till their eyes were drawn to meet the compelling gaze of the "Master" of a lost race.

A something which, at first glance, seemed all head—this was the "Master." The naked body, so skeleton-thin, was shrunken and distorted; it was withered and leathery-brown, like the aged parchment of mummified flesh. It was seated in a resplendent chair, whose radiating handles were for its carrying; and, above it, the head, so incredibly repulsive, was made more hideous by its travestied resemblance to human form.

Soft, pulpy and wetly smooth—a ten-foot sac, enclosed in a membrane of dead gray shot through with flickerings of color that flamed and died—the whole pulsing mass was supported in a sling of golden cloth. And, dominating it, in the center of that flabby forehead, a focal point for the gaze of the horrified observers, was a single glassy and lidless eye.

Cold, unchanging, entirely expressionless except for the fixed ferocity that was there, the eye was a yellow disk of hate, where quivering lines of violet culminated in a central, flaming point; and

that point of living fire swelled prodigiously before their staring eyes. It seemed to expand, to slowly draw their senses—their very selves—from their bodies, to plunge them down to annihilation in that fiery pit where a soundless voice was speaking.

"Slaves! Apes! Take the captives to the great altar rock of Vashta, to the Holy of Holies. The others you were permitted to slaughter for our food; hold these two safely. For one shall die slowly for Vashta's pleasure, and one shall live on for mine. And we would not have them under our mental control, so guard them well; the offering is more pleasing to Vashta when the blood in his cup flows from a creature unbound both in body and mind." And the two helpless humans found themselves released from the flaming pit that became again but an eye in the forehead of a loathsome thing.

THEY were fully conscious of their surroundings as they were herded up through the pyramid and out into the night, where rough, calloused hands seized them and dragged them to a smooth table-top of rock that stood only slightly above the ground before the great rocky pile. Stunned, waiting dumbly, they saw swarming ape-men clustered like bees on the lower pyramid face; they saw coverings of stone being removed and a great recess laid open, while the ape-things dropped in awe before a grotesque and horrible beast-head carved from a single piece of stone.

The eyes of the beast shone with some cold, hidden light. They seemed fixed hungrily upon a cup in a distorted hand, and, though the cup was empty, there was promise of its being filled. For little sluices of stone sloped from the place where the captives stood, and they ended above the cup so that the life-blood of a slaughtered creature, or a sacrificed man, might pour splashingly in, a streaming draught for this blood-thirsty god.

The arena filled with abominable life. Now, in the dark silence of a moonless night, the cold stars shone down on a gathering of spectators, wild and unreal—nameless, spectral horrors of a blood-chilling dream.

The flat capstone of the pyramid was the resting place of the "Master"; his huge head showed pulpy and gray above the glittering gold of the metal carrying-chair where a misshapen body was seated. Others like him had poured from the pyramid, carried by thousands of slaves to their places about the arena.

Monsters of prodigious strength, their forebears must have been, but this degenerate product of evolutionary forces had lost all firmness of flesh. Their bodies, sacrificed for the development of the bulbous heads, were mere appendages, fit only for the propagation of their kind and for the digestion of human food.

THE clean air of night was polluted with abominable odors as it swept over the exudations of those glistening, pulpy masses. To the two waiting humans on the great sacrificial stone came a deadening of the senses, as an executioner, armed with strange torturing instruments, drew near. But, of the two, one, clinging hopelessly to the other, abruptly stifled the dry choking sobs in her throat to lift her head in sharp, listening alertness.

Walt Harkness was speaking in a dead, emotionless tone:

"Chet has failed us; he is probably dead. Good-by, dear—"

But his words were interrupted and smothered by a breathless,

strangling voice. Diane Delacouer, staring with agonized eyes into the night was calling to him:

"Listen! Oh, listen! It's the ship, Walter! It's the ship! It's not the wind! I'm not dreaming nor insane! Chet is coming with the ship!"

It was as well that Chet Bullard could not see the two, could not hear that voice, trembling and vibrant with an impossible, heart-gripping hope; and surely it was well that he could not share their emotions when, for them, the silence became faintly resonant, when the distant, humming, drumming reverberation grew to a nerve-shattering roar, when the black night was ripped apart by the passage of a meteor-ship that shrieked and thundered through the screaming air close above the arena, while, with the rock beneath them still shuddering from the blasting voice of that full exhaust, the sky above burst into dazzling flame.

FOR Chet in that control-room that was darkened that he might see the world outside—Chet, grim and haggard and stained of face and with thin-drawn lips that bled unheeded where his teeth had clamped down on them—Chet Bullard, Master Pilot of the World, had no thought nor emotion to spare for aught beyond the reach of his hand. He was throwing his ship at a speed that was sheer suicide over a strange terrain flashing under and close below.

He overshot the target on the first try. The twin beams of his searchlights picked up the dazzling black and white of the arena; it was before him!—under him!—lost far astern in one single instant that was ended as it began. But his hand, ready on a release key, pressed as he passed, and the sky behind him turned blazing bright with the cloud of flare-dust that made white flame as it fell.

Such speed was not meant for close work; nor was a ship expected to hit dense air with a blast such as this on full. Even through the thick insulated walls came a terrible scream. Like voices of humans in agony, the tortured air shrieked its protest while Chet threw on the bow-blast to check them and slanted slowly, slowly upward in a great loop whose tremendous size was an indication of the speed and the slow turning that was all Chet could stand and live through.

HE came in more slowly the next time. Floodlights in the under-skin of the ship were blazing white, and whiter yet were the star-flares that he dropped one after another. Brighter than the sunlight of the brightest day this globe had ever seen, the sky, ablaze with dazzling fire, shone down in vivid splendor to drain every shadow and half-light and leave only the hard contrast of black and white.

In the nose of the ship was a .30 caliber gun. Chet sprayed the pyramid top, but it is doubtful if the two below heard the explosions. They must have seen the whole cap of the mountain of rock vanish as if, feather-light, it had been snatched up in a gust of wind. But perhaps they had eyes only for each other and for a glittering, silvery ship that came crashing toward the place where they stood, that checked itself on thunderous exhausts; then touched the hard floor of the arena as softly as the caress of a master hand on the controls.

But from them came no cry nor exclamation of joy: they were dazed, Chet saw, when he threw open the port. They were walking slowly, unbelievingly, toward him till Diane faltered. Then Chet leaped forward to sweep the droop-

ing, ragged figure up into his arms while he hustled Harkness ahead and closed the port upon them all. But, still haggard and stern of face, he left the fainting girl to Harkness' care while he sprang for a ball-control and a firing key that released a hail of little .50 caliber shells whose touch could plough the earth with the ripping sword of an avenging god.

And later—a pulverous mass where a huge pyramid had been; smoking rock in a great oval of shattered crumbling blocks; and, under all the cold light of the stars, no sign of life but for a screaming, frantic mob of ape-men, freed and fleeing from the broken bondage of masters now crushed and dead!

All this Chet's straining, blood-shot eyes saw clearly before his hand on the firing key relaxed, before he covered his eyes with trembling hands as realization of their own release rushed overwhelmingly upon him.

THERE were supplies of clothing in the ship—jackets, knee-length trousers, silken blouses, boots, and even snug-fitting, fashionable caps. Very unlike the ragged wanderers of the mountainous wastes were the three who stood safely to windward of a spouting fumerole.

Mud, coughed hoarsely from a hot throat, and green, billowing gas!—there was nothing now to show that here was the scene of a companion's last moments. With heads bared to the steady breeze that had been their undoing, they stood silent for long minutes.

Behind them, at a still safer distance, where no chance flicker of a fire-god's finger might strike him down as it had the white man, a black figure danced absurdly from foot to foot and indulged in unexpected gyrations of joy.

For did not Towahg hold in one hand a most marvelous weapon of shining, keen-edged metal, with a blade that was longer than his two hands? What member of the tribe had ever seen such an indescribably glorious thing? And, lacking the words even to propound that question, Towahg spun himself in still tighter spirals of ecstasy.

Then there was the ax! Not made of stone but fashioned from the same metal! And besides this a magic thing for which as yet there was not even a name! It made flashing reflections in the sun; and if one held it just so, and moved one's head before it, it showed a quite remarkably attractive face of a man who was more than half ape—though Towahg had never yet been able to catch that man beyond the magic that the white men called "mirror."

He was still enthralled in his grotesque posturing when Diane looked down from the floating ship.

"He'll be the Lord Chief Voodoo Man for the whole tribe," she said, and, for the first time since they had stood at the fumerole, she managed to smile. "And now," she asked, "are we off? What comes next?"

CHET'S hand was on a metal ball in a crudely constructed cage of metal bars. He looked at Harkness, and, at the other's almost imperceptible nod, he moved the ball forward and up.

"We're off!" Harkness agreed. "Off for Earth—home! And it will look good to us all. We will take up things where we left them when we were interrupted; there's no Schwartzmann to fear now. We can show our ship to the world—revolutionize all lines of transportation; and we can plan—"

He failed to finish the sentence. To his reaching vision there were,

perhaps, more potentialities than he could compass in words.

And Chet Bullard, fingering the triple star on his blouse—the insignia that had gone with him through all his hopes and despairs—looked out into space and smiled.

Behind him a brilliant world went slowly dark; it became, after long watching, a violet ring—then that was gone; the Dark Moon was lost in the folds of enshrouding night. Ahead was an infinity of black space where only the distant stars struck sparks of fire in the dark. And still he smiled, as if, looking into the unplumbed depths, he, too, made plans. But he moved the little ball within his hand and swung the bow sights to bear upon a glorious globe—a brilliant, welcome beacon.

"Home it is!" he stated. "We're on our way!"

But there was needed the rising roar from astern that his words might have meaning; it thundered sonorously its resounding hum in a crescendo of power that brooked no denial, that threw them out and onward through the velvet dark.

(The End.)

In the Next Issue

MORALE

A Unique Story of Super-Modern Warfare

By Murray Leinster

GIANTS ON THE EARTH

Beginning an Outstanding—a "Different" —New Two-Part Novel

By Capt. S. P. Meek

THE WHITE INVADERS

A Complete Dimensional Novelette

By Ray Cummings

—And Others!

The Readers' Corner



A Meeting Place for Readers of Astounding Stories

Mr. Wright on Sea-Serpents

Dear Editor:

It's an old argument, the one I'm going to bring up now: the existence or non-existence of the sea-serpent.

In introducing this creature into "The Terror from the Depths," my latest story of the Special Patrol Service, I had a rather good background of evidence to support the theory that such creatures have existed, and still do exist, right here on old Mother Earth; and some of our Readers might be interested in inspecting that evidence.

One of the earliest writers on the subject of sea-serpents is Hans Egede, a Danish missionary who saw "A dreadful monster ... upon the surface of the water in the year 1734, off our new colony, in the sixty-fourth degree out of the water, its head reached as high as the mast-head, its body was as bulky as the ship, and three times as long." This, mind you, from a missionary!

A few years later, in 1746, a seaman by the name of Kopper made oath that he had seen a sea serpent "... of a greyish color, and the mouth quite black and very large. ... Besides the head and neck, we saw seven or eight folds, or coils, of the snake, which were very thick and, as far as I could guess, there was about a fathom's distance between each fold."

A bishop of Bergen, Pontoppidan by name, describes very much in detail the sea-serpent that he had seen along the coast of Norway, and in 1808 a sea-serpent was actually cast up on the coast of Stronsay, one of the Orkney Islands.

It was seen by several trustworthy witnesses, and the measurements taken. It was apparently a baby serpent, since it measured but sixty-five feet in length. In the same year, another man of the cloth, a Mr. M'lean, parish minister of Egg, saw a serpent on the coast of Coll—wherever that is.

In 1817, several persons reported a huge sea serpent off the coast of Massachusetts, and a Society of Naturalists at Boston appointed a committee to look into these reports, and make an official statement concerning them. From this report we learn that "On the 10th of August, 1817, the serpent was seen in the harbor of Gloucester, at a distance of about 130 yards. ... Solomon Allen, a shipmaster, also saw the animal in Gloucester Harbor on three separate occasions, and set down the length as being between eighty and ninety feet, and the thickness about half that of a barrel." John Hobinson and W. Pearson, both apparently re-

tives of Gloucester, also observed the strange denizen of the deep! In all, eleven persons swore to having seen the serpent in Gloucester Harbor, and a number of others stated under oath they had seen a similar creature off the coast of Maine some years before. The Rev. Abraham Cummings saw one in Penobscot Bay, and judged it to be about seventy feet in length. During the Revolutionary War the British fleet reported seeing a serpent a number of times, estimating the length to be about three hundred feet. This latter was probably a fairly well developed specimen, although perhaps not full grown.

The Daedalus frigate, M'Quahae, master, sighted a sizable sea-serpent on August 6, 1848, in lat. 24°, 44' S., long 9°, 27' E., and made a detailed report of the experiences to the Admiralty. The newspapers of the day made big stories of M'Quahae's report.

It isn't necessary, either, to stick to the old sailing days, to secure sea-serpent stories. The steamship *City of Baltimore* sighted a sea-serpent on January 28, 1879, and the animal was described by the Major Senior of the Bengal Staff Corps in the following words: "The head and neck, about two feet in diameter, rose out of the water to a height of about twenty or thirty feet; and the monster opened its jaws wide as it rose, and closed them again as it lowered its head, and darted forward for a dive, reappearing almost immediately some hundred yards ahead. . . The shape of the head was not unlike pictures I have seen of the dragon, with a bulldog appearance of the forehead and eyebrows."

I could cite you more evidence, but surely it's not needed. There are sea-serpents, of course, but it happens that these scientists have never seen them. They're rare, that's all. And, as old John Hanson would say, "If these white-coated laboratory men can't pour a thing into a retort or test-tube, to break it down into its component parts, or measure it with rule and line, then it doesn't exist."

I hope I never grow so old I can't believe in sea-serpents!—S. P. Wright.

P. S. In these Prohibition days, I'll venture there are hundreds of persons who have seen sea-serpents without even venturing upon the sea. Evidence? Oceans of it!

"Ready to Pounce on It"

Dear Editor:

Like some of the other Readers, this is my first letter to you, and maybe it will be "filed" in the waste-basket. But here goes, anyway.

One thing I can't understand is why anyone would kick about having advertisements in a magazine. If M. Weisinger had to pay for the publication of a couple of hundred thousand copies of a magazine with his own money, I'll bet he would be glad to have a few companies put their advertisements in the mag. Right?

And a line or two about smooth edges. Everybody wants them—and when they get them they still say they don't like them because they overlap one another. Now what will they want next? I ask you? They'll probably want the mag with gilt edges and have it handed to them on a silver platter. Huh? I don't care if you print it on second-hand paper and put it together with nails, I would continue to read A. S. anyway. If you have good stories and a good cover by Wesso or Paul.

Anyone who didn't like "The Exile of Time" ought to quit reading A. S. and start reading "Peter Rabbit" or "Alice in Wonderland." I thought that it was a Blue Ribbon winner and A-1. And Diffin's "Brood of the Dark Moon" is going to be another in the same class. I could see that after I read the first page of it.

I don't wish Saranoff any bad luck, but I hope he slips on a banana peel and breaks his rubber neck. How I hate to see that guy get away from Doc Bird and Carnes!

"The Danger from the Deep," "The Moon Weed," and "If the Sun Died" were all plenty good. "The Midget from the Island" was in a class by itself. It was a good story. What I mean, it was so different from the others. "The Moon Weed" brought another scientific marvel to the magazine. It would be a wonderful thing to watch things materialize in "the crystal bowl." Like watching a miracle happen.

I have been reading A. S. for a year, and have liked all the stories, every one (no kidding, and no exceptions). When I'm through with my magazine there is always some one around the house that is ready to pounce on it. They are sometimes standing by my side waiting until I get through with it!—H. Perry, 2042 W. 25th Avenue, Denver, Colo.

Oh, Well!

Dear Editor:

Some people are never satisfied. I'll bet a certain person kicked plenty about the rough edges. And now that they are smooth what does he up and say but that the leaves stick out beyond each other! Why kick so on the edge of the paper, when it's what inside that counts?

Like Bernice Harrison, I—one of those "females"—do not understand all the mathematical and scientific terms, but that doesn't keep me from thoroughly enjoying the stories. In fact, I like the science. I can usually understand enough of it to get the general idea, and it makes the story very interesting.

I'll not try to tell you which stories I liked the best. They are all so good. Especially "Menace the Mighty" and "The Exile of Time."

You know, I'm going to start a "Read-

era' Corner Album." Kinda silly, I suppose you think. But the letters are so interesting. Even the knockers! You see, I pass my magazines on to my friends. Only fair, don't you think?

Now I'll tell you something very amusing. I hadn't even noticed particularly that the edges of the paper were uneven! Can you tie that? I was so interested in what was inside, that I never noticed the outside, except the covers, which are wonderful!

I would like to know Mr. Allen Spoolman. There's a thanker for you! There are two or three questions I should like to ask him, but I have used up enough space. And, besides, he probably thinks that a girl can't do that type of thinking. Oh, well!—Miss Betty Larimer, 109 Woodlawn, Topeka, Kans.

A Bomb

Dear Editor:

Having read your August issue, I have immediately decided that that is the best published yet. All the stories were immensely entertaining.

All your Authors are stars, but I think you should try to get some stories by H. G. Wells, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Otis Adelbert Kline and Sax Rohmer.

Now, donning a bullet-proof shirt and steel helmet, I drop a bomb-shell and scurry for cover. I do not like Wesso's drawings. He always draws the expression on a man's face the same. His monsters are as near human as the story will permit, and he hides his poor backgrounds in a smudge of smeary blots and lines. I consider your other artist, Gould, as superior to Wesso; and Paul—oh, what an artist!—his drawings are perfection itself. I am glad to see that he illustrated "The Earthman's Burden," and hope to see more of his illustrations in your—'scuse it—"our"—magazine in the future.

I wish to add my name to the list of those who wish romance obliterated from the last pages of A. S. Let those who desire love stories subscribe to some of Mr. Clayton's love story magazines and leave us in peace with our Astounding Stories.

I want reprints, but not in the monthly mag: why not put out an annual or semi-annual containing them? Don't you think it is time for A. S. to become a semi-monthly? If this can't be done, why not put more stories in one issue?

Don't you ever let Commander John Hanson and Dr. Bird escape from our loving clutches. We could hardly do without them.—Robert Leonard Russell, 825 Casey Ave., Mt. Vernon, Ill.

We've Already Told Him

Dear Editor:

I have been reading "The Readers' Corner" in your marvelous magazine, Astounding Stories. To tell you the truth, it is the best magazine on the market. I have been reading it for the last nine months and when I finish with my copies I get some of my boy friends interested in them. I have just finished reading the August issue, and the sequel to "The Dark Moon" was just great.

Mr. Editor, please tell Mr. H. G. Winter that he had a marvelous story in the August issue and to keep up the good work.

Try and make Astounding Stories a semi-monthly. I can hardly wait until the next issue is out.—Jimmie Sakely, Darlington, S. C.

Like a Sieve?

Dear Editor:

I have been reading the "mag" for quite a while and I thought I would respond to your invitation for everybody to join in "The Readers' Corner." In doing so I should like to add my voice to those who are trying to induce you to publish a large size quarterly. Charge as much as you want for it, but for gosh sakes hurry up and come out with it.

Now to discuss the stories a bit. The best stories that appear between the covers of A. S. are those of the Dr. Bird series by Capt. S. P. Meek. The only trouble with them are that they are not published often enough. The Commander John Hanson stories are also very good. Let's have more of them. "The Exile of Time," by one of my "favorites," was very good from the story standpoint, but scientifically it was so full of holes that it made a sieve look like a water-containing vessel. Even so, I enjoyed it immensely. I think that the sequel to "Dark Moon" bids fair to pass the original. I was sorry to see that "Brood of the Dark Moon" was a serial, because now I will have to wait three months for the conclusion.—Edward F. Gervais, 512 So. Pennsylvania Ave., Lansing, Mich.

"Different"

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of your mag for the last two years. I have just finished reading the August issue. "The Port of Missing Planes" was a wow, with "The Danger from the Deep" a close second. In fact, they all were excellent.

This is the first time I have written to "The Corner." I have been a silent Reader of your magazine for two years, and I think it is about time to write in once, anyway.

I must congratulate you on what a great mag you have. I read it because it is *different* from other Science Fiction magazines. I stumbled upon it by accident on a pile of magazines I borrowed from a friend. I have no brickbats to throw, and I have no criticisms of any of the stories. It makes no difference what kind of paper the stories are printed on; it is the stories, not the paper, that counts.—Frank Pinter, R. R. 1, Box 155, Georgetown, Ill.

One Objection

Dear Editor:

Although I am a very young man, I have been taking Astounding Stories two years and can remember only three issues which I have disliked. In the August issue the stories I liked best were "The Midget from the Island," by H. G. Winter and "The Moon Weed," by Hasl Vincent.

I have one objection. One month between every edition is much too long to wait. I read a copy of Astounding Stories in a short time—and then have to wait until another month is up for the next issue.

I would sincerely appreciate and answer any letters from other Readers.—Charles Stillman, 137 North 2nd West, Richfield, Utah.

Even a Daily

Dear Editor:

I am departing from my ancient and honorable tradition of "no letter writing."

Some people should be spanked. In the July issue, Mr. Davis would like a *twice* monthly issue. Mr. Ackerman would like to have a quarterly. Somebody else wants a weekly. Next, they'll want a daily. Leave "our" mag as is, except to have one reprint to a volume, as Mr. Benefiel suggests.

Mr. Carrington doesn't like the crabs, lizards, alligators, worms, human freaks, and a couple of other things which inhabit Mars, Venus and the several other planets. Why doesn't he write a story himself?

You printed a story of two men who were traveling in a spaceship, *Nomad*. I forget the name and author. They got tangled up in an octopus of space. These kind of stories I eat, drink, think and sleep on. Kindly print some more of them.

I hope that A. S. does not lose any of its astounding and interesting Authors, stories and Readers. I'll not use any more ink (as the Scotchman once said).—Billy Stechmann, 85-5—85th Road, Woodhaven, N. Y.

The Rocket in a Vacuum

Dear Editor:

In the "Readers' Corner" of the August issue of Astounding Stories, Mr. Crowson stated that it would be a saving of fuel if explosives were not used as a means of propulsion for spacecraft in a vacuum, because the explosives or discharged gases have nothing to push against, as air or the earth, to give the rocket motion.

Mr. Crowson is looking at the principle of rocket propulsion at the wrong angle, and I'll endeavor to make clear to him why the rocket moves in a vacuum.

In a rocket there is only one opening, namely the "tail end" from which the exploded gases are ejected. When gas in the chamber of the rocket is exploded the gas is expanded to a very high pressure. The molecules of this gas are in a very high rate of motion and bombard the front of the rocket chamber and in turn impart their force of motion to that part of the rocket. In the meantime the gas that is near the end of the opening of the chamber, the "tail end," will go through this opening.

Thus, we have an unequal balance of forces in the rocket; motion is imparted to the fore part of the rocket only, and hence results in forward motion.

The bombardment of the molecules of expanded gas against the sides of the chamber is negligible, as will be seen after a little reflection.—S. S. Sarkisian, 12019 Wallace St., Chicago, Ill.

To Annihilate Matter

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading the August number of Astounding Stories, and I enjoyed it immensely. Capt. Meek's "The Port of Missing Planes" was excellent. Keep-et up, Capt. Meek! "If the Sun Died" was thought provoking and very interesting. "Brood of the Dark Moon" promises to be very good, although I had rather you went back to 3-part novels. Each of the remaining stories was just another story—except for "The Midget from the Island," which was bizarre and eccentric, and written in a singular style.

Referring to the letter of Richard Waite, 8 South Ave., Warsaw, N. Y., who claims that matter is indestructible, please allow me to bring this subject to a head by suggesting the following.

Matter can be broken up into its constituent parts, chemically or otherwise, and as Mr. Waite states, it can be condensed or it can be enlarged in size. Now, as a temporary digression, we can attack the problem from another angle. Quite a large number of people are familiar with vibrations, and the expression is very often heard, "Everything is a matter of vibration." This is quite true: everything we see, hear, or feel is a matter of vibration. Light is a form of wave motion from the sun; heat waves are also radiated by the sun, and, what is more, matter itself is fundamentally a motion.

Some of us are familiar with ether waves and the position of each wave in the spectrum. At one end we have the audio-frequency vibrations. These vibrations are audible because they extend from 02-30 kc in frequency and the ear can respond to this frequency. Their wavelength, however, varies from 15,000,000 to 10,000 meters. Next in line come the usual radio waves with a frequency of from 30-3000 kc and with a wavelength of from 10,000 to 100 meters. After these come the short electric waves, which will be very important in the future. The radio heat waves discovered by Dr. E. H. Nichols are included in this group. These waves extend from 3000 to 300,000,000 kc

in frequency and from 100 to .001 meters in wave length. Then, skipping the infra-red or heat waves, we reach the light waves. These extend from 387,000,000,000 to 759,000,000,000 kc in frequency and from 7750 Angstrom units to 3900 units of the same. They are important because their low wavelength produces a chemical effect in the retina of the eye and are therefore visible. Passing the ultra-violet and X rays, the Gamma rays are the smallest known, having wavelengths from 1 to .01 Angstrom units, and having a frequency of from 30,000,000,000,000,000 to 300,000,000,000,000,000 kc.

Now below this wave are many unknown ones. Matter is one of them and is at the lowest part of the spectrum, probably having a wavelength of zero and a frequency of infinity. Zero and infinity are complements of each other. The electrons may be said to be the concentrated meeting point of these infinitesimal waves, which are so small that they seem solid.

That matter is a vibration of zero wavelength, I cannot prove, but to sum up in a few words and to conclude the hypothesis, I will say that if a ray can be found that neutralizes this matter wave, then *matter will be annihilated or destroyed*, since, if the wave is neutralized, it is non-existent, and it of necessity follows that the matter resulting from this wave is also non existent.—Robert Altemare, 773 E. 155th St., N. Y.

A First-Timer

Dear Editor:

I am writing to your magazine for the first time.

In the July issue, "The Doom from Planet 4," was excellent. Second came "The Hands of Aten." The rest were all very good.

In the August issue the best ones were: "Brood of the Dark Moon," "The Danger from the Deep" and "The Midget from the Island."

The authors I like best are: Charles W. Diffin, R. F. Starzl, Ray Cummings and Arthur J. Burks. As a whole the magazine is fine, edges and all.—Bruno Wrimann, 401 E. 92nd St., New York, N. Y.

For the "Wise Guy"

Dear Editor:

The stories in this August issue were all very good but I wish to say at this time that "The Danger from the Deep" by Farley was terrible in a few respects. It was not in the class of the other stories in this issue.

I noted a while ago in "The Readers' Corner" that some "wise guy" talked viciously about Astounding Stories, ran down the magazine as much as he could and said he didn't like it. I wish to say that instead of this magazine being rotten, I think this———[censored] Chances are he bought one copy, read "The Readers' Corner" and thought he'd be funny. However, if he dislikes the magazine and the stories, I'd like to know why the devil he reads them. Some people give me a pain in the neck.

Personally, I think Astounding Stories is the best magazine on the market, but—I really would like to see more stories in it.

If I don't get a sequel to "The Fifth Dimension Catapult" I guess I'll be forced to use vicious, profane words.—Ken F. Haley, Lebanon, N. H.

"Doesn't Tire Your Eyes"

Dear Editor:

The August issue of A. S. is unfortunately only the third I have been able to procure, but I think that's enough to allow me to make a few comments.

I was probably just as pleasantly surprised as any other Reader when I found smooth edges on a recent issue. Wesso's illustrations are fine, but I don't think Paul is so hot. (I can already see a cloud of brickbats approaching for that!)

"The Midget from the Island" was fine, so was "The Port of Missing Planes." "The Moon Weed" was O. K., except the method of transporting objects from the moon was a little bit vague. "The Brood of the Dark Moon" was fine, and I'm patiently awaiting the next installment. "If the Sun Died" wasn't so good. "The Danger from the Deep" was fine.

My biggest hobby is Astronomy, so consequently I love interplanetary stories and also time-traveling stories. Let's have more of these.

I like the size of the print in A. S. It's easy to read for an hour at a time, and doesn't tire your eyes. In no other Science Fiction magazine have I ever found anything like it, and I've tried 'em all.—Donald Woodford, 363 Gregory Ave., West Orange, N. J.

Not Many Likes

Dear Editor:

I have read the last six issues of Astounding Stories, and I must break into the Readers' Corner with my opinion of your magazine.

First, I must tell you what I think the standard of Science Fiction should be, and my criticisms may be taken with this standard in mind.

Science Fiction must have good science and feasible scientific explanations, otherwise it is not Science Fiction. Stories in which the hero flies to Mars or the moon and goes through a series of crazy adventures without the hint of a scientific explanation, are not Science Fiction. Of course, there must be some adventure and romance in the real S. F. stories, but good science must be mixed in it. In short, Science Fiction is literature with adventure and science cleverly blended.

Mr. Harry Pancoast is right when he says that no real Science Fiction fan would fall for your stuff. Your stories do not come up to the standard aforementioned. You must have more science in the stories if you want to make a real S. F. magazine out of Astounding Stories.

"Beyond the Vanishing Point" is, in view of the standard above, the worst story you have printed. There is not a scientific explanation in the whole mess of bunk. The drugs taken by the characters not only reduced or enlarged their size, but affected their clothes and the things they carried as well! It's ridiculous.

"The Exile of Time" is another bum story, almost as bad. The explanation is not science. It is plain bunk. Don't care for short time-traveling stories anyway.

"Masape the Mighty": to my mind this is not Science Fiction. No doubt, some of your Readers thought it was a great story, but to me it was trash.

"The Port of Missing Planes": Usually the Dr. Bird stories are very good, in this one I found flaws.

Now for the stories which were good from the adventure standpoint. They are, set down in the order of my appreciation: "Brood of the Dark Moon," (there *is* some science in Mr. Diffin's work), "The Doom from Planet 4," "Dark Moon," "The Ghost World," "The Meteor Girl," "The Earthman's Burden," "The Lake of Light," "The Midget from the Island," "If the Sun Died," "The Moon Weed," "Holocaust," "The Hands of Aten."

Although I prefer the cold, hard scientific type of story, I do like to read adventure—if, of course, its science is not impossible.

I agree with the fellow who said that the size of A. S. is a disgrace to a Science Fiction magazine. Why not increase the size to 9" by 12" and raise the price to twenty-five cents?—the price being a disgrace to a S. F. magazine, too.

Illustrations: usually very poor. I was glad to see an illustration by Paul in the June issue. Why not get him to do the covers? Wesso's covers are very poor, the ones on the June and August issues particularly. These covers would certainly not attract a real fan. After one look at them—and the price—he would pass the book up as cheap trash.

However, all in all, A. S. is a very good magazine, taking into consideration the fact that it is still "young."—Carlyle Bessette, Charlotte, Vt.

"Fifteen Cheers"

Dear Editor:

I have just finished your August, 1931, issue of Astounding Stories. In my opinion it was the best ever.

I have been reading the issues just almost as long as anyone, I suspect, but this month is up to the standard with Farley writing a great story about "The Danger from the Deep." Then Diffin starts a sensational story, "Brood of the Dark Moon." Starzl comes through with a good story, "If the Sun Died." H. G. Winter gives us a good scientific story, "The Midget from the Island." Vincent brings us a story in "The Moon Weed." S. P. Meek brings us one, where Dr. Bird once more gets the best of Saramoff in "The Port of Missing Planes."

I would like some more stories from the following Authors: Ray Cummings, Jack Williamson, R. F. Starzl, Edmond Hamilton. They are the leaders.

I agree with H. M. Crawson, Jr., that there should be a thicker Astounding Stories. I think that A. S., if once read, takes the Reader over to its side.

In closing, let's give Astounding Stories fifteen cheers, and long may it continue!—R. L. White, Box 794, Knoxville, Tenn.

"I am They"

Dear Editor:

In reply to Mr. Partridge's query in the August A. S.: Our "self-realizant" ego, "I am I," is a product of our own peculiar make-up and environment. An amoeba can hardly be said to be self-conscious, nor can an hypothetical universe-encompassing being limit itself to our "I am I." If we were to suddenly find ourselves consisting of words, it wouldn't take us long to start thinking "I am they" instead of the selfish, one-cell-brain idea, "I am I."—Joseph N. Mosich, 4062 Sixth Avenue, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Notice

Dear Editor:

Will the Science Fiction fan from Oklahoma, who tried to get in touch with me while in San Francisco and Los Angeles, please write to me at this address immediately.—Forrest J. Ackerman, 530 Staples Avenue, San Francisco, Cal.

Likes the Ads

Dear Editor:

This is my first letter to you. I've read three issues, just finished the third, so I think I have a right to voice my opinions of the mag. Stories first. The August issue is the best I have read so far. Here are the stories and how I like them:

"The Danger from the Deep"—swell; "Brood of the Dark Moon"—start of a red hot story; "If the Sun Died"—pretty good; "The Midget from the Island"—one of the best I've read; "The Moon Weed"—good, but not original; "The Port of Missing Planes"—good and how!

As for the mag itself, it suits me fine. The stories are the main thing in any mag and as long as they are good and the type readable, I'm satisfied. I don't agree with M. Weisinger, in wishing to have no advertising at all. I like to read the ads, and, besides, lots of the dough to run mag comes from this source.—Will Hopp, 2065 N. 11th St., Terre Haute, Ind.

Gently, Gently

Dear Editor:

As a Reader of mature age, let me put in a claim for the group of Readers to which I belong—which, I am sure, is bigger than you realize. No doubt, looking over your mail, you form the impression that most of your Readers are high school students or even younger. They probably write the most letters, partly for the thrill of seeing their names in print. But I personally know of at least two grown people who read Astounding Stories. I saw them read it as we commuted home on the "L," and that is how I came to meet them. We found that our viewpoints on Science Fiction agree.

Our adult viewpoint makes us close the book in disgust when we come upon a story such as "The Moon Weed," by Harl Vincent, which you thought good enough to feature on the cover. It starts out fairly well, but to an experienced S. F. fan it soon becomes just one pain after another. The alien weed idea is old. H. G. Wells used it first in "The War of the Worlds," and he used it skilfully and credibly. The matter-disassociating telescope or radio idea has been used over and over by skilful writers, and is due for a rest. As for this Kelly villain, he is the stock in trade whom incompetent writers constantly haul out to bolster up a weak and unconvincing plot. After rehashing the warmed-over ingredients of a number of outworn stories, Vincent flops the mess into a plot mold that is as dull and commonplace as a bread-pan. There is a lot of hectic rushing around. Governors and Presidents do silly things, and woodenly anonymous characters at Washington mess around. After counting his pages and noting that the story is long enough to bring him a good check, the Author then has the hero invent a ray. Marvelous! (They will invent a perpetual motion machine for you over night if the emergency demands it.) With his ray the hero then destroys the moon weeds. Baloney!

No wonder Science Fiction is rated by many people as very trashy reading. Far be it from panning your magazine as a whole. If all the stories were bad I would simply pass up Astounding Stories on the newsstands and say no more about it. But you often have good stories by writers such as Murray Leinster, Charles W. Diffin, R. F. Starzl, R. M. Farley, not to forget S. P. Wright and F. V. W. Mason. R. F. Starzl has not yet written a dud, and I ought to know, as I read all the S. F. magazines. And the other good Authors mentioned are not far behind him.

Here is how I rate the stories in the August book: "If the Sun Died," "Brood of the Dark Moon," "The Midget from the Island," "The Port of Missing Planes," "The Danger from the Deep," "The Moon Weed." I am told that Editors are very sensitive about criticism of their Authors, as this implies that they erred in ordering the stories in question. For this reason I do not expect to see these remarks in print. And that is all right too, if you'll only be more particular about admitting too amateurish stories.—Jas. B. Bernholtz, c/o E. Theisen, Morgan Apts., Lawrence Ave., at Lincoln and Western, Chicago, Ill.

Excuse It, Please

Awfully sorry, but an unpredictable concatenation of fortuities prevented our getting the first instalment of Capt. S. P. Meek's two-part novel, "Giants on the Earth," in this issue. Will you excuse us? It will surely appear next month.

"The Readers' Corner"

All readers are extended a sincere and cordial invitation to "come over in 'The Readers' Corner'" and join in our monthly discussion of stories, authors, scientific principles and possibilities—everything that's of common interest in connection with our Astounding Stories.

Although from time to time the Editor may make a comment or so, this is a department primarily for *Readers*, and we want you to make full use of it. Likes, dislikes, criticisms, explanations, roses, brickbats, suggestions—everything's welcome here; so "come over in 'The Readers' Corner'" and discuss it with all of us!

—*The Editor.*

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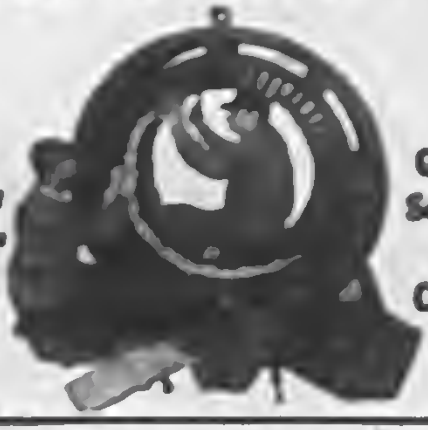
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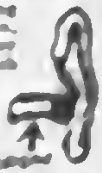
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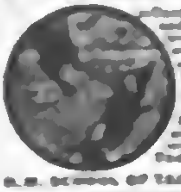
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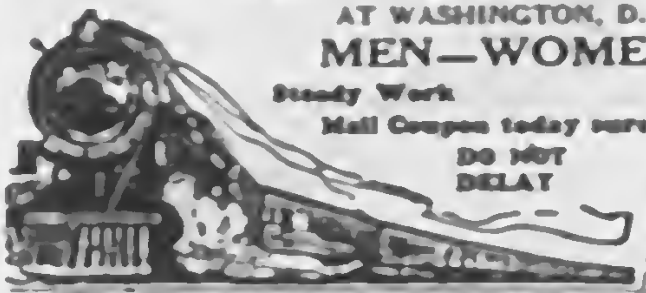
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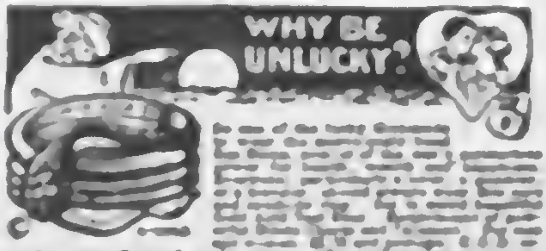
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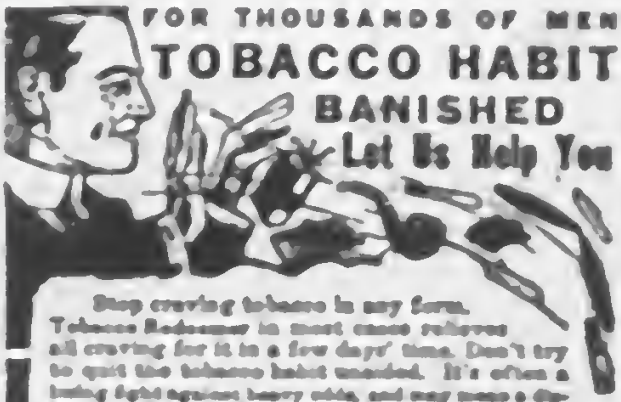
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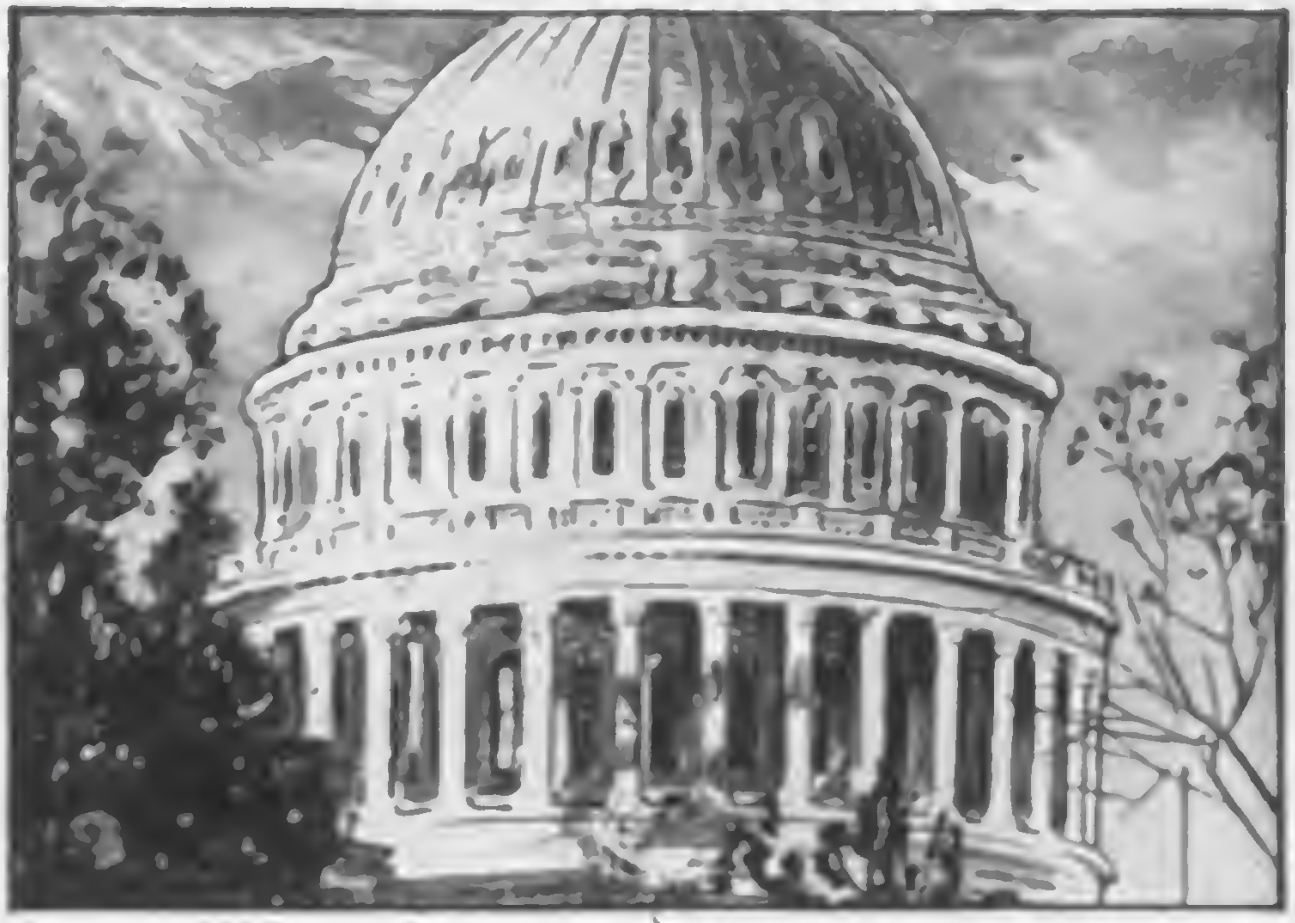
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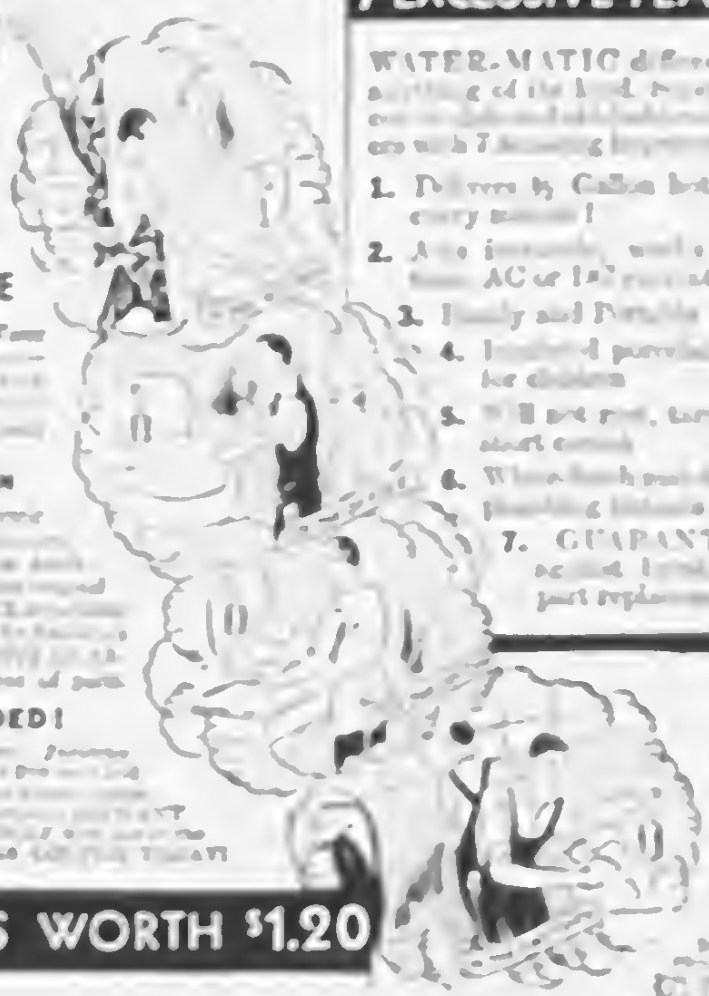
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